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A LIVID LADY'S GUIDE to GETTING EVEN
How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires

“Leave? But what will you do, then?”
I gave her a smile that came from the bottom of my heart. The raging inferno that was burning in my chest had settled down into a cold fury. Now, I was ready to announce my intentions to the world and make a vow.
“I’ll take revenge.”

Misha
Tail
A cat-girl training to become Elizabeth's new waiting maid, who also receives combat lessons.
Tida
A young sister whose cheerful, free-spirited nature contrasts her occupation. Misha Elizabeth on her way to the capital, becoming friends with her quickly.
Mireille
Katarina
Elizabeth's confidant and waiting maid. She followed Elizabeth to the empire and became her right-hand woman.
Elizabeth
Leiston
The young lady of a ducal house betrayed by her family and country after her fiance broke off their engagement. Swearing to take revenge with the help of her seven powerful magic grimoires, she fled to the empire and started a business
Lunoa
Carlton
Stella who Elizabeth saw potential in and turned into her apprentice. Elizabeth's intelligence and insight helped them flourish.
Lucas
Lebrick
The nobleman, formerly the empire's ambassador in Haldoria, who helped Elizabeth defect. Later, he let her open a business in his territory and offered support

"Knight's Crest... What a grand name. One that is far too heavy for a sham of a knight like you to bear."
"A sham... of a knight..."
Robert fell to his knees, looking up at Elizabeth.

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Prologue

I knew I sang high praise of myself, but I had to admit I was outstanding.

As the daughter of a duke, I stood at the top of the nobility. I had long silver hair that glimmered in the sunlight, deep ocean-blue eyes, and unblemished skin as fair as snow. If you asked a hundred people to assess my appearance, they'd all give the same answer: I was beautiful.

I was educated and had always shown great talent in academics, etiquette, martial arts, and magic. Most people would agree that the gods had blessed me.

As far as I could remember, I had been engaged to the crown prince and was to become the future queen.

Never did I have qualms about my situation. Even if I had not chosen this path, I was aware of my duty as a noble lady to dedicate my life to the well-being and happiness of my people.

Or at least, that's what I thought until that fateful day.

◇

"Elizabeth, I cannot keep forgiving your wicked deeds!"

A man's voice suddenly interrupted the refined music played by the orchestra of the royal family and echoed in the dance hall. The music and idle conversations stopped at once. All heads in the formerly perfectly peaceful hall turned to stare at both the speaker and me, Elizabeth Leiston.

Those gazes were unpleasant, but I deliberately did not let my feelings show. I remained calm and addressed the man who had blown up at me out of the blue—my fiancé and the crown prince of the Kingdom of Haldoria, His Highness Prince Friede.

"Prince Friede," I started. "We're welcoming important guests to celebrate the founding of our kingdom tonight. I'd appreciate it if you could please leave the jokes for another time."

Today was the anniversary of the occasion I'd mentioned, and

we had invited eminent nobles and officials from neighboring countries.

Under normal circumstances, His Majesty the King should have hosted this event, but he'd left the country to attend a meeting regarding a monster attack that had occurred a couple of months ago.

The crown prince had stepped in as his proxy and, for some reason, deemed tonight to be the perfect moment to condemn me publicly. His behavior was so disgraceful that I couldn't even begin to describe it as anything but scandalous.

Regardless of what Prince Friede hoped to achieve by airing his dirty laundry aloud, I had to resolve this matter quietly.

"Come now, let's forget about this," I said with a smile, hoping to ease the atmosphere. I extended my hand toward the prince. "Would you care to dance—"

But the one who took my hand instead was Robert Arty, the son of the knight commander.

"What are y—"

I tried to complain, but Robert didn't allow me to finish my sentence. He twisted my arm and brought it behind my back, forcing me to kneel.

Then, I let out a surprised groan. Although I could have resisted, I didn't want to create a greater commotion. That would be unwise, considering the circumstances.

Prince Friede didn't seem to agree.

"Elizabeth, I know what you did to Sylvie!" he declared passionately—and loudly—as if he were an actor onstage. "You've gone too far this time!"

My eyes instantly went to the young lady standing behind him. A group of young noblemen surrounded her, eager to protect her.

Her name was Sylvia Lockit, and she was Baron Lockit's illegitimate child that he recently took in.

Sylvia was a year younger than the prince and me. Even though she wasn't very popular with the ladies, many gentlemen had taken a liking to her outspoken nature. They considered her candid behavior a breath of fresh air in the constraints of high society.

Prince Friede and Robert fell for her charm too.

Who the prince took as his second wife was none of my business, and I did not mind if he surrounded himself with an army of mistresses. After all, siring as many heirs as possible was his duty as a future king.

However, there was a proper way to go about these things. Order was important, since the conflict between his heirs could lead to a war if they handled things poorly. It was also crucial that a future king found suitable, cultured ladies.

I'd done my best to convey that to Sylvia, advising her several times not to mingle with other men if she was to have a relationship with His Highness. Considering the swarm of men around her, she hadn't heeded my warnings.

"What do you mean by 'this time'?" I asked. "I don't recall doing anything worth this treatment."

Robert still held me down as I hoped to sort this out so he'd unhand me. But my words only seemed to irritate the prince even more.

"How dare you ask what I mean?! You let your ugly jealousy take over and pushed Sylvie down a flight of stairs!" he roared.

I paused for a few seconds, confused, before answering. "Please calm down, Your Highness. I've never—"

"Shut up! Sylvie told me everything! She's far too nice, so she keeps covering for you but I won't let you bully her anymore! Guards! Take her to jail!"

The guards approached me to follow the prince's command, yet they did not touch me. I could see the confusion on their faces.

"What are you doing?! Drag her away! Now!"

"B-But..." mumbled a guard who looked at the prince, then at me.

I understood his reaction. While the prince spent his days idling away, I helped the king and my father with their work and used

most of my time cleaning up the prince's messes. It was clear who the guards saw more often and preferred.

Still, it would have been unwise to drag this out in front of so many prying eyes.

"It's all right," I said.

"Huh?" answered the guard.

"You can't disobey a royal command, can you? Come on, let us go."

"Y-Yes. I apologize, my lady."

Robert let go of me, and the guard took my arm before leading me to the dungeon. As we stepped out of the dance hall, I heard Prince Friede proclaim the end of our engagement and say that he'd take Lady Sylvia as his fiancée instead.

I couldn't believe he'd pulled this in the middle of a party. How did he intend to deal with the consequences of his actions?

"Forgive me for bringing you to such a terrible place, Lady Elizabeth," said the guard.

"There's no need to fret. You're only following the prince's orders," I said. "Could you tell me if they informed the king and my father? I'm sure they will fix this mess upon their return."

I bade the guard farewell and sat on the moldy wooden chair that decorated my cell in the humid and smelly dungeon.

Afterward, I sighed and said, "To think this happened at a time when no one was here to talk back to Prince Friede... No, I suppose he chose this moment on purpose."

High society was cruel. Once rumors started spreading, your reputation would suffer because it didn't matter whether they were true. If the prince wanted to remove me from the picture entirely, he'd definitely picked a good time.

Well, I'm sure His Majesty and my father will rush home as soon as they hear of it.

I was forced to wear an antimagic collar around my neck. In the days of the Old Kingdom, they used such restraints on criminals to prevent them from using magic. This long-lost practice had recently resurfaced in old records. The crown prince ordered that they use one on me because of my strong magic.

"Good grief," I said, tapping on my collar.

I let out a deep sigh.

◆

“What?!” a man roared.

The room he was sitting in had lavish decorations, as did the rest of the sumptuous residence he and his delegation occupied for the international conference.

“Is this true?!” he questioned.

“Y-Yes,” the messenger answered sheepishly.

Bulat Haldoria, king of the Kingdom of Haldoria, gnashed his teeth in anger and frustration. Despite his age, he was still an imposing and muscular man. The king, who used to be known as the fearsome God of Thunder on the battlefield, wore his countless battle scars as decorations.

Faced with the rage of such a formidable man, the messenger shook with fear. He could not help that his teeth chattered.

“Please calm down, Your Majesty,” said the man sitting beside the king.

“You’re right,” said Bulat, looking at the messenger. “My anger got the best of me, and I am sorry. Thank you for delivering this message to me. Go rest.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

The messenger scrambled out of the room.

“That idiot just won’t stop causing trouble…” the king lamented.

“I agree that His Highness the Prince is a bit of a handful,” said the companion with a sour face.

The man in his prime who sat next to the king was Duke Sieg Leiston, the prime minister of the Kingdom of Haldoria.

While the men were away to attend an international conference, the crown prince called off his engagement and chose a new fiancée. Even worse, he’d announced it at a very public event.

One of them was initially supposed to remain in the kingdom, and unforeseen circumstances had forced them to attend this meeting. This situation left the prince to rule in their absence.

“I thought that everything would be all right since Elizabeth was with him. Who would have thought he’d do something like that?” said the king, sighing.

“Even though she’s been jailed, I’m sure Elizabeth will find a way to fix this,” responded Sieg.

“That’s fair. Your daughter is quite exceptional, after all.”

“She is outstanding.”

Bulat nodded. “All right. We’ll leave this to Elizabeth, then.”

Both men sipped on their wine and complained about Friede's lack of wit. Neither of them spared another thought for Elizabeth.

No one noticed that the maid standing right outside the door suddenly disappeared.

◇

A month went by since my imprisonment.

Piles of tax documents, administration materials, and reference books that civil officials had brought to me covered the crude desk in my cell. Ever since the party, Friede hadn't visited me once.

"Does he not worry about the confidential information in these documents leaking in the dungeon?"

I flipped through the papers facing me, fed up with the prince's irresponsibility.

"Though I always knew Prince Friede wasn't the most meticulous, I never would have thought he could be so careless..." I whispered to no one in particular.

My voice echoed softly in the dungeon.

"Oh?" I whispered.

A few hours passed, and I held a crimson book as I stood up.

"Excuse me," I said louder.

"What can I do for you, my lady?" asked the guard monitoring the dungeon in a polite manner.

I could tell he was clearly unhappy to see me behind bars. He had no choice but to obey the prince, currently the most powerful person in the castle.

"Could you come closer, please?"

"O-Of course."

Just then, the man followed my request and walked up to my cell. He was neither wary nor able to react in time. I extended my right arm and snapped my fingers, to which his eyes went hollow as his face relaxed. He appeared to be in a daze.

The dark attribute spell I'd used, Hypnosis, wasn't all that difficult to counter. Why did the guard fall for it so easily, then? Perhaps because he had been far too careless.

He would never have imagined that a helpless, considerate young lady such as myself would attack him when wearing an antimagic collar. Besides, many knew my proficiency in water

magic. This guard had trained with the knights several times and witnessed me freely wielding water and ice.

Everyone knew that, excluding fundamental spells, people could only use attributes they had an affinity for. As such, that guard couldn't have expected me to cast a dark attribute spell.

"Go back to your seat and forget everything you're about to see," I said.

"Yes... Certainly, my lady..."

The guard wobbled back to his chair and sat down, staring at the air with a vacant expression on his face.

"You can come out," I said.

There was an unnatural distortion in front of my cell, then a maid about my age appeared.

"I apologize for the wait, my lady," she said.

"It's fine, Mireille. Thank you for coming." The crimson book I was holding disappeared into thin air.

Mireille was my waiting maid, as well as my confidant. I'd asked her to follow the messenger to check His Majesty's and my father's reaction.

"So, how did it go?" I asked.

"Well..." she started.

As I listened to Mireille recount what she'd heard, I felt a dark rage surge inside me. They were perfectly aware of how serious the situation was, yet they left me to deal with the aftermath.

When I thought about it, this had been happening often recently. King Bulat summoned me anytime Prince Friede got into trouble to fix it. My father was the same, telling me it was important to uphold Friede's image for the good of the kingdom; I had to do all the prince's work and ensure he got all the credit.

Mireille seemed worried for me but continued, "After returning, I found out that rumors that may tarnish your honor were spreading, my lady."

"Rumors?" I repeated.

"Yes. People are saying that you tried to murder Lady Sylvia out of jealousy and that you're getting involved in politics to seize the prince's power. They are undoubtedly groundless accusations, but they are spreading nonetheless."

"Did you learn the source?" I asked after a pause.

"I got some of our people to investigate and pinpointed a few merchants and nobles. They all have ties with that waste of spa—

Erm, I mean His Highness."

"Right," I said with a brief sigh. "How widespread are those rumors?"

"I'm afraid getting rid of them entirely will prove impossible. The merchants and nobles who know you don't believe a word. But many people already believe them to be true."

"I see."

"As for your firm, my lady..."

Mireille referred to the firm I managed. After pushing for relief policies and seeing those projects fail due to a lack of funding, I set up a firm when I was twelve to earn money I could spend freely.

Over the years, my firm became one of the most influential businesses in the kingdom. I used it to give jobs to as many people as I could while running a different charity, helping to reduce inequality.

"The prince has ordered an investigation into it after deeming you a traitor to the nation. He is also actively placing merchants and nobles under his control in key positions at the firm."

"This is ridiculous! Even if I'm the suspect of planning a coup, they should only remove me from the firm! What right does the government have to mess with the personnel? There is no legal basis for this, is there?!"

"There is none. Prince Friede has been misusing his authority and forcing everyone to comply. The executives are standing up to him as much as possible, but they cannot keep the crown prince in check."

I clenched my teeth.

A shadow passed over Mireille's face as she hesitated momentarily. She looked straight at me and said, "I know it's not my place to ask, but... Why do you devote yourself to this country, my lady?" She struggled to conceal the anger in her voice.

"Why, you ask?" I said, then paused. "That's because I'm a noble lady..."

"Do you believe it is worth it even when they have treated you like this?" she asked. She gritted her teeth in frustration and continued, "My lady, I... I respect you. You saved me when my house fell to ruin. Without you, I'd be a slave or a beggar, yet you made me your trusted confidant."

"Mireille?"

"I—!" she suddenly exclaimed.

It surprised me to hear her shout, so I quickly cast Silent—a soundproofing spell—over the entire dungeon.

"I despise this country! The nobles treat you like a convenient tool they can discard whenever they please! I hate the masses for turning their back on you after hearing absurd rumors when you've done nothing but help them! And I despise the king and Duke Leiston for relying on you all the time and ignoring you in your most dire moment! Above all, I loathe the prince!"

Mireille's voice echoed in the freezing dungeon.

I didn't know how to react. Mireille was always by my side, discreet like a shadow. She had presented herself as a levelheaded person, and I'd never seen her let her feelings take over like this.

The echoes quieted, and her anger permeated my heart. Every emotion I'd repressed all these years, unaware they had existed, exploded like a raging volcano.

"You're...right..." I said with a sense of realization.

As if answering Mireille's outburst, the rage that had welled inside me made my entire body shake. I could feel a fire spreading through every nerve. The anger I'd felt earlier was nothing but a small ripple. But this overwhelming feeling was my true fury.

"Why?" I whispered. "Why did I..."

Since I came into this world, I'd devoted my entire life to this nation and Prince Friede. As I was his future queen, my duty was to support this country. I wasn't allowed to make friends and had to study martial arts, magic, and etiquette relentlessly.

What was the point of it all?

The person I was ready to dedicate my life to had trampled over me, the nation I'd worked so hard for had abandoned me, and those I'd done everything to protect had betrayed me.

I smashed my bare fist into the wall of my cell, which made a large crack appear with a thunderous noise.

"Why did I do all this...? What was the point...?"

"My lady! Your magic!"

Mireille's voice brought me out of my trance. I noticed my mana was leaking uncontrollably and took a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down.

"Thank you, Mireille," I said. "You've opened my eyes."

"My lady..."

"Let's leave this damned country!"

"Leave? But what will you do, then?" she asked.

I gave her a smile that came from the bottom of my heart. The raging inferno that was burning in my chest had settled down into a cold fury. Now, I was ready to announce my intentions to the world and make a vow.

“I’ll take revenge.”

Chapter 1: Escape

I'd take revenge on my homeland.

Having made up my mind, I needed to act promptly. I gave Mireille several tasks to complete before we could make our escape.

"That should be all we need," I concluded.

"Understood, my lady," stated Mireille. "What about the firm? How should I deal with it?"

"Let me think..."

His Highness the Prince—actually, there was no longer any need for me to respect that scumbag. Friede was replacing my people with his own, obviously seizing control over my firm.

In that case...

"Let him replace our people. I'm sure he'll dismiss or demote most of those who are loyal to me," I added. "Tell them to leave the country when that happens. They should use different routes at different times to be careful. Our most influential executives and skilled experts are crucial, so have them lie low for a while. Once I've established myself abroad, I'll contact them so we can move forward."

"Certainly, my lady. I'll pass on your orders."

"While you are at it, ask a few of our trusted partners to remain in the capital. We'll need them to gather intelligence."

"Naturally. I'll ask *him* to select a few suitable individuals for this task."

I nodded. Seeing that I had no links with that man, I doubted anyone would make a connection and knew he could handle it.

"We'll leave in five days, Mireille," I said. "Right before the king and his retinue return. I'll leave the preparations to you."

"Yes, my lady. May your new journey be blessed," she said with a detached tone before bowing.

I almost couldn't believe a woman like her had lost her cool entirely earlier. Instead of leaving, though, she stared at me without saying another word.

"What is it, Mireille?" I asked.

“With all due respect…I suggest you do something about that,” she said, gesturing at the hole I’d punched into the wall.

“Right…”

I completely forgot how I’d hit the wall with mana concentrated around my fist. Unless I did something to hide it, the guards would notice immediately.

My decision had agitated me more than expected, and I needed to be careful not to make any mistakes. I couldn’t reveal myself until I made my escape.

“I suppose I’ll have to fix it,” I said. Hence, I stimulated the mana in my body and gathered it in my left hand.

In this world, all living beings had mana. The ability to control it using reason and theory was called magic. A magician’s training culminated in the creation of a Divine Artifact.

Since one materialized their inner mana as a Divine Artifact, everyone had different powers and appearances based on the magician’s preferences, personality, experience, and other factors. In most cases, it took the form of a weapon or armor.

Most magicians who reached the necessary level had to create a Divine Artifact because they were knights or adventurers—basically, people who needed to fight. The exceptions were overzealous researchers and the occasional gifted noble child who’d trained from a young age.

While Divine Artifacts were usually considered weapons, sometimes items with no fighting potential would appear. My Grimoire of Wisdom was one such exception, as it took the form of a tome and recorded all the information I’d seen at least once. It could also decode and translate documents for me.

Or so I’d told everyone around me.

I had kept the true nature of my Divine Artifact a secret—even from my father and the king. Recording and analyzing data was only a fraction of what I could do.

In truth, my real Divine Artifact had taken the form of seven powerful tomes: the Seven Grimoires.

Keeping an ace up one’s sleeve was one of the basics of high society. And so, I hadn’t even told my father—*no, I should call him the duke. Someone like him isn’t my family.*

Still, I hadn’t told the duke the truth about my abilities. Even Mireille, the person I trusted the most, only knew about four of my grimoires. I hadn’t realized it before, but I seemed to have

developed trust issues along the way.

"Grimoire of Beelzebub," I said, then a crimson tome appeared in my left hand.

The Grimoire of Beelzebub was one of the Seven Grimoires, and it let me record other people's magic spells. I could cast them even if I didn't have any affinity with their attributes. That was how I'd been able to use the dark attribute spell Hypnosis when I only had an affinity for water spells.

I flipped through the pages of the Grimoire of Beelzebub until I found the right one.

"Stone Wall," I recited. Thanks to my Divine Artifact, I could activate this earth attribute spell without issue. "That should do it."

Once I concealed the hole I made on the wall, I dismissed Mireille and made sure she was gone to lift the effects of Hypnosis. The guard tilted his head to the side with a puzzled look, probably having very fuzzy memories of the past few moments.

I sat back down and started planning my revenge.

◆

"It feels good to be home," said King Bulat.

"Indeed, Your Majesty. I'm sure Elizabeth took care of government matters in our absence, but that doesn't change how you're needed here," responded Sieg.

Bulat laughed, saying, "My officials always tell me she does a better job than I do, don't they?" The king was a warrior at heart and aware he wasn't the best politician.

"So, how is Friede?" asked the king to one of the officials tasked with supervising Elizabeth and Friede in his absence. "I bet he's somewhere sulking because Elizabeth gave him another earful."

"W-Well... The thing is..." said the official, hesitating. "The prince left to, erm...inspect a territory...with Lady Lockit."

The official had made up that excuse on the spot. The truth was that the prince actually took a little trip with his lover.

"What?! How dare he when he knew we'd come back today? What is Elizabeth doing?! Managing Friede's schedule is her job!" the king roared.

"L-Lady Elizabeth is in the dungeon...under the prince's order..."

Duke Sieg yelled in astonishment, "Are you saying that

Elizabeth is *still* in jail?!"

No hint of anger or worry lay in his voice. He wasn't mad that his daughter stayed in the dungeon for over a month; it surprised him to hear she had yet to get out.

"Take us to Elizabeth!" exclaimed Bulat.

He and Sieg followed the civil official to the dungeon in a hurry, where they found an utterly confused guard. The guard snapped out of his daze, then greeted the king and prime minister to the best of his ability.

Although Bulat was in a sour mood, he knew the guard wasn't to blame for Elizabeth's imprisonment and refrained from doing so.

"Where is Elizabeth?" asked Bulat instead.

"Sh-She's in th-this cell," he said, pointing at it. "B-But..."

"What is it?" Sieg pressed the slurring guard.

Due to Sieg's position as the prime minister and Elizabeth's father, the guard couldn't easily explain the situation.

"W-Well," he said with an apologetic look. "Lady Elizabeth hasn't moved from that chair in two days... She hasn't examined the documents we brought her, and she won't eat anything!"

"What?!"

Bulat and Sieg rushed to Elizabeth's cell, only to find the young woman sitting quietly with her back facing them. They called out to her, but she didn't respond.

Despite the guard's comments about Elizabeth not eating, her complexion looked healthy enough from what they could see.

"Elizabeth! Why aren't you answering?! Guard, open the door," ordered Bulat.

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Your Majesty, b-but Prince Friede took the key to Lady Elizabeth's cell with him..."

Bulat clicked his tongue in anger, then lifted his right hand to make a whirlpool of mana, dense enough to make the air shake, appear. The king condensed it into his palm to turn it into a lightning blade.

"Divine Artifact," chanted Bulat. "Glazermierch!"

The God of Thunder swung his large blade, making a flash of lightning illuminate the room as a blaring roar echoed. He'd cut right through the cell's steel bars, which were as thick as a woman's arm.

Bulat dispersed his Divine Artifact and walked with Sieg to see Elizabeth. Even with the uproar, she hadn't moved a finger.

“Elizabeth,” called out Sieg, extending his hand to touch his daughter’s shoulder. “She’s…cold?”

Cracks started spreading through her body until Elizabeth’s figure shattered within seconds, and pieces fell to the ground.

“Wh-What in the world is going on?!” shouted Bulat.

“Is that…an Ice Doll?!” exclaimed Sieg, picking up a shard of ice. “I can still feel her mana. She must have placed this doll in her stead two days ago, when the guard said she stopped eating.”

“Where’s the real Elizabeth, then?!”

Neither Sieg nor the guard had an answer to offer their king.

Bulat’s face went pale. His reaction was justified, as Elizabeth was deeply involved in his kingdom’s government. She partook in everything, from administration to military affairs. Her disappearance could have terrible consequences.

Moreover, her Divine Artifact, the Grimoire of Wisdom, had recorded countless state secrets throughout the years. That knowledge included top secret military information such as maps and population details, secret techniques from the castle’s forbidden collection, and ancient texts that dated to the Old Kingdom.

“Find her! Find Elizabeth at once!”

◇

On the day of my escape, I busied myself with the final preparations in my quite familiar cell. I had already used Hypnosis on the guard and was ready to proceed with the plan.

“Ice Doll,” I chanted, creating an icy copy of myself.

While I’d used plenty of mana, I was confident the doll would hold for around ten days if no one touched it. Two days remained until the king and the duke returned, and I doubted anyone else would dare touch “me.” No one would figure out I was missing until then.

“Oh my, I almost forgot,” I said, looking at the Ice Doll.

I gathered some more mana and added an antimagic collar around the doll’s neck. Friede had ordered the guards to put one on me to seal my magic, yet those things were not useful on me. *I* had made them, after all.

Since I’d rediscovered and analyzed forgotten records from the castle’s forbidden book collection, I anticipated someone might one day use these artifacts against me. I’d modified their structure a

little so that they'd immediately stop working when they came in contact with my mana.

"Shall we go, Mireille?"

"Yes, my lady."

Once I stepped out of my cell, I asked the guard a few questions and learned Friede had the key to my cell. That wasn't an issue, though. A touch of ice magic was all I needed to create a duplicate.

I closed the cell behind me and left the dungeon with Mireille. The guard would snap out of my Hypnosis in a short while.

Mireille and I climbed the stairs and arrived at a door leading us to the corridor. I hadn't been up here in a month.

I could feel my anger churning inside. Ever since Mireille had helped me come to terms with my feelings, I was much more self-aware. According to her, I was learning how to express myself.

"Mireille."

"Yes, my lady," she said, then prepared a spell. "Illusion."

Mireille had an affinity for light attribute spells. The one she had cast, Illusion, allowed you to manipulate the light to trick others. You could use it to conceal yourself or assume the appearance of someone else.

"Let's go."

Now that we were invisible to others, we sneakily walked through the corridors and exited the castle.

◆

Having just finished his last report, Lucas Lebrick rested his pen on his desk. He brought his hand to his face and massaged his forehead, closing his eyes.

He then sipped black tea, hoping to get over his tiredness.

Lucas sighed and said, "I can finally go home."

As a viscount, I had to serve as an ambassador to my country in the Kingdom of Haldoria. My homeland, the Yutear Empire, was a young nation founded only a century ago. Nevertheless, it had successfully expanded far beyond its original borders and had several nations under its control.

The Kingdom of Haldoria was the only nation on this continent that could rival the Yutear Empire with military power.

Our nations had been at odds for a while, though a distressing

war led to the signing of a truce five years ago. The Kingdom of Haldoria and the Yutear Empire were now on friendly terms—publicly, at least.

My father, the previous head of the family, had suddenly passed away in an accident. This situation forced me to succeed him at the young age of sixteen. At the time, I was but a noble of the robe—a measly baron with no land.

After I turned twenty, the emperor summoned me and granted me the title of viscount along with a territory. The land was bigger than any other viscounty and located on the border with Haldoria. He said it was a reward for my hard work.

While it might sound like a dream come true for a young aristocrat, the truth differed. Tensions with Haldoria were rising, so the emperor used me, a young and insignificant noble with no backing, as a shield. Despite my inexperience, I understood that my newly gained territory was but a buffer zone in the eyes of the emperor.

This time, I received orders to attend the celebration of the founding of the Kingdom of Haldoria.

After traveling through the wasteland that was an actual buffer zone inside a carriage until my arse started hurting, I'd reached the royal capital. I'd proceeded to make small talk with the detestable nobles of the kingdom at the party. Though our words were refined and cultured, our exchanges resembled children's petty arguments.

I'd dreamed of becoming a proud nobleman like my father, but my ideals had long deserted me. All I ever did as a viscount was bicker or offer empty flattery.

A sigh escaped my lips as I was bored to death by the emptiness of my function. Suddenly, a commotion attracted my attention. It shocked me to hear the crown prince of the Kingdom of Haldoria publicly condemn his fiancée, the daughter of the prime minister.

Good grief. Is the prince an idiot? Who airs their dirty laundry in public like this? I thought.

A glance was enough to notice how foreign guests mocked him quietly.

The duke's daughter tried to give the prince a chance to stop, yet he failed to take it. Instead, he ordered her imprisonment before announcing that a baron's daughter I'd never heard about would become his new fiancée.

Even when taken away, the duke's daughter didn't bat an eye

and marched gracefully. The kingdom's nobles had diverse reactions, as some looked pissed while others were concerned. A few noblemen and women seemed pleased.

Among the foreigners, only two reactions unfolded: shock or mockery. I was among the surprised ones.

I never thought the prince would do something like this. After all, the young lady he'd dismissed was quite famous.

She'd been behind most of the kingdom's recent advances. At the tender age of ten, she'd led troops into battle to inflict considerable damage on the empire in the previous war. As an imperial subject, I couldn't be more pleased to see that foolish prince willingly discard the kingdom's trump card.

After the commotion, I went to the embassy to write a report detailing the events that had transpired during the party.

A month had passed since then, and I had finished the rest of my duties in the kingdom. Tomorrow, I'd finally be free to return home.

"L-Lord Lucas!" expounded the servant I had brought from the Yutear Empire, storming into my office.

"It's late. What is it?" I asked.

"Y-You have a visitor..."

"A visitor? I don't believe I had any appointments tonight. Who are they?"

"W-Well..."

As soon as I heard the name of my mysterious visitor, I jumped from my chair and rushed to the drawing room.

I took a deep breath before opening the door.

"I apologize for the wait, King Bulat."

The king of Haldoria was sitting in my drawing room, looking at me as I entered. He hadn't brought an escort, and only a maid accompanied him.

I couldn't help but think something was strange. The king was supposed to be out of the country attending a conference regarding a monster attack. Though I heard he'd return soon, I couldn't imagine why he would stop at my residence first.

While I was pondering the reason behind his sudden visit, the king stood up and bowed to me.

"Huh?" I blurted, utterly confused.

His show of deference made absolutely no sense. In fact, the

king should have avoided showing me any sign of weakness *because* I was the ambassador of the Yutear Empire.

"First of all, allow me to apologize for tricking you like this." The voice that had come out from King Bulat sounded oddly soft and melodic.

"Huh?" I repeated, most eloquently.

"Mireille," said King Bulat with that strangely mismatched voice.

The maid reacted by bowing deeply before clapping her hands. Was she casting a spell? Or was she banishing one, perhaps? She didn't need to clap but was most likely doing so to demonstrate that she was using magic and meant no harm.

Having concluded that I wasn't in danger, I stopped looking at the maid and directed my sights at the king. But I found a beautiful young woman in his place.

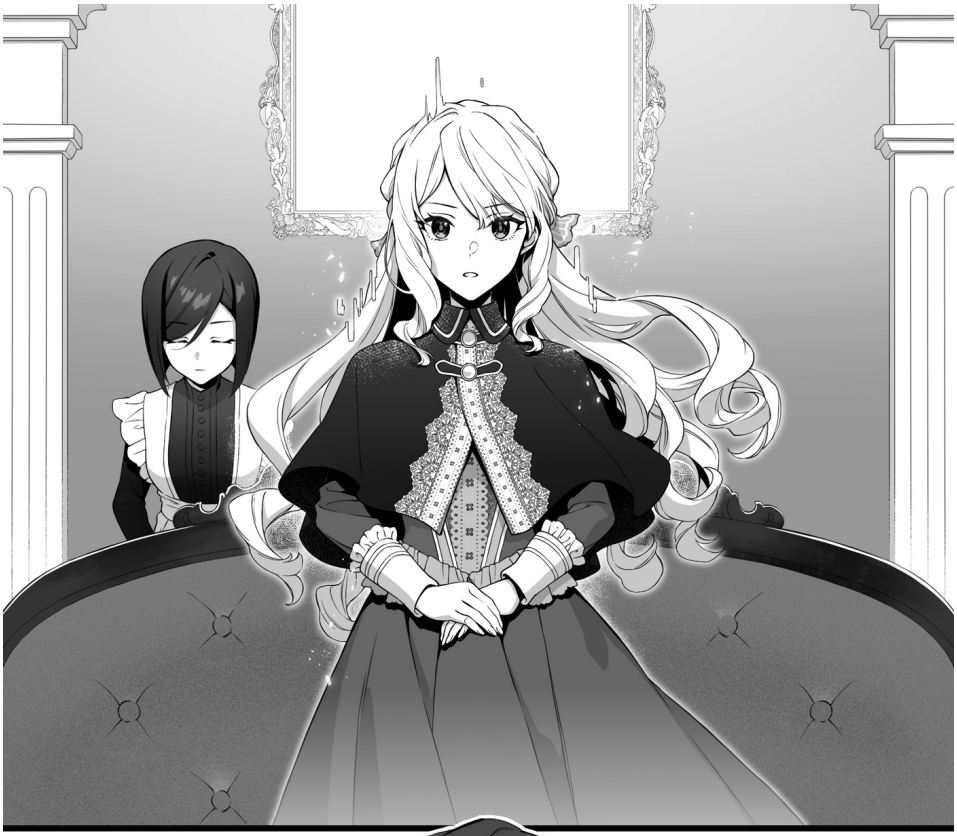
I barely stopped myself from letting out a surprised yelp.

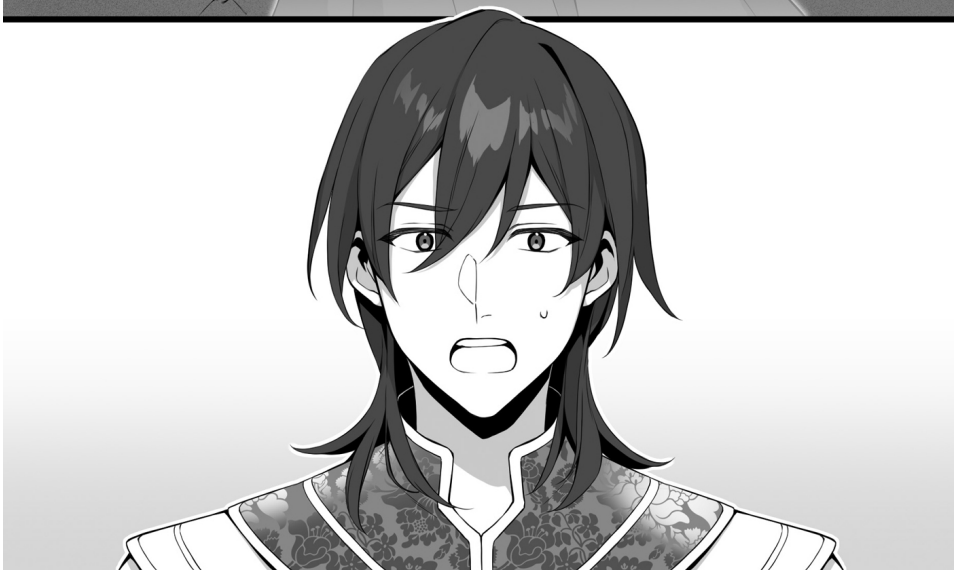
"L-Lady Elizabeth..." I whispered.

Elizabeth Leiston, the backbone of the kingdom, stood in front of me. The only issue was that this young lady was supposed to be in jail at this very moment.

◇

I bowed down to Lucas Lebrick, the ambassador of the Yutear Empire, again to apologize for my impoliteness. Meanwhile, he remained staring at me with his mouth agape.





I'd practically forced him to meet with me by concealing my identity. Worst-case scenario, he'd instantly point his sword at me for breaking into the embassy. If that happened, I wouldn't be able to complain.

"It's been far too long, Lord Lucas," I said, seizing the opportunity. "I'm Elizabeth from House Leiston."

"I-Indeed, l-long time no see, Lady Elizabeth," he said hesitantly.

"Forgive me for concealing my identity to see you. I hope you can pardon me."

In high society, admitting your faults meant putting yourself in a position of weakness. Had this been a negotiation, the Yutear Empire would have had a field day and made the boldest demands.

For that reason, I apologized while Lucas was still confused. As long as he didn't overthink it, there was only one proper reaction for him—a cultured gentleman—to have when faced with a young lady's sincere apology.

"Well, I... Hmm... I understand the circumstances that forced you to act this way. Let's put this behind us, my lady," replied Lucas.

"I am most thankful for your generosity, my lord."

Lucas had forgiven me without getting ahead in the negotiations. A more cunning aristocrat would have set my apology aside and started probing to know what I wanted. I'd expected as much from a young noble like him, but Lucas's reaction showed he was still green. No takebacks existed in our world. Should he retract later, it would hinder his honor.

I'd played my cards correctly. Bowing my head was well worth it if I could avoid tangible losses. I didn't need to worry about my dignity as a future ruler, so I had no reason to allow meaningless pride to impede me.

"So, Lady Elizabeth," Lucas started. "Could you tell me why you're visiting me at such an hour? Besides, aren't you supposed to be in jail?"

He had calmed down but had yet to notice that he wasted a card he could have used against me.

I hid my real intentions behind a smile and said, "I'm here because I would appreciate being granted asylum in the empire."

Lucas naturally froze. I was the daughter of a duke, not some soldier or insignificant noblewoman, and had a hand in government affairs. The latter was information not known to the public. Still, I had no doubt the empire's spies knew about my involvement in politics.

After a long pause, he finally answered, "A-Are you...being serious?"

"As serious as can be."

"While I agree that Prince Friede's conduct at the party was...disgraceful, the king and your father will return soon. They'll discipline him and place you back in your position."

"They will. The king would never let the crown prince pick that woman over me. My issue is that my patience has reached its limits, and I can no longer tolerate their irresponsibility. I intend to leave the Kingdom of Haldoria and put all my energy into taking revenge."

"Y-You want to take revenge?!"

"Indeed," I confirmed. "You must have heard the dreadful rumors that are spreading about me, Lord Lucas."

"I suppose I have..."

"Then, don't you think asking me to forget about all this and still dedicate myself to this country would be too much?"

Lucas stared at me, unable to answer.

"I will get my revenge," I said again, "and I'll crush this damned country with my own two hands."

"Huh?!" cried out Lucas for the umpteenth, looking dumbfounded. "I'm sure you realize your actions will affect the citizens, knowing how much you've done for them. Can you truly bear to hurt them?"

"You're right. I am directing my anger at the prince, the king, the duke, and the other ministers. Oh, and Robert. As you said, the citizens of this kingdom will get caught up in this and face irreparable harm."

Lucas remained silent.

"However, I fail to see how that's my problem."

"What?"

"As a noblewoman, I have a duty to the people," I said. "And yet, the very people I devoted my life to betrayed and threw me out like a rag. Once I surrender my title, I shall bid farewell to the duties accompanying it. I have no intention to hurt the masses, but I

will not make an effort to protect them."

"I-I see..." answered Lucas, a bit unnerved.

"So, would you grant me asylum?"

"Well..." he said, resting his chin on his hand.

"I'm not asking for any kind of leadership role," I insisted. "Simply allowing me to seek refuge in your territory would be more than enough."

"Why did you choose the empire?" he asked with a brief pause. "Even though our nations pretend to be friendly, we're basically enemies. Wouldn't you have more freedom in another country? Or better yet, on another continent?"

"That is a fair point, Lord Lucas. I doubt I can live as I please in the Yutear Empire. But I would like to reiterate that my goal isn't to flee and live in peace. Rather, I want to get even with those who have wronged me."

I paused before continuing.

"The Kingdom of Haldoria is a strong nation, even with a foolish king who only reveals his true self in war. His army is powerful, with plenty of competent individuals in the administration—starting with the duke. Though I'm fairly strong, I cannot challenge such an opponent alone."

"Does that mean you want the military backing of the empire?" asked Lucas, narrowing his eyes.

His mana suddenly erupted, turning into sharp thorns. Mireille instantly prepared for combat, and I stopped her with one hand.

I smiled at Lucas, then related, "I may intend to rely on the empire's strength but will not discard it like a tool when I see fit. What I offer is a mutually beneficial relationship. I'll crush the kingdom and offer the spoils of war and glory to the empire in exchange for its help. I believe we'll all benefit from this arrangement."

"You have a gift for making enticing proposals," Lucas said.

"Certainly, I do," I answered. "Still, I assure you I meant every single word. The Yutear Empire is the only nation that rivals the Kingdom of Haldoria, thus it is the best partner I could dream of."

"I see..."

"I'll make sure *you* also benefit from our collaboration, Lord Lucas," I added with a smile.

Lucas banished his mana and sighed.

"All right," he said. "I'll allow you to join our side. But you

must understand I cannot immediately take you to the imperial capital. You won't be free to wander as you please, and you must remain in my territory on the border until I finish monitoring you. Do you accept those terms?"

"Of course. That is fine by me."

I never expected him to let a central figure of Haldoria's government roam free in the imperial capital out of the blue. That was enough for now. I had to earn Lucas's trust, one step at a time.

"To a most fruitful collaboration," I declared, grinning.

◇

A single, unsuspecting carriage made of quality materials appreciated at close range moved toward the northern gate of the royal capital. The lone horse that pulled it was also a remarkable animal.

"Halt!" ordered an on-duty guard at the gate.

Under normal circumstances, the guards would inspect the carriages. As soon as they read the note the coachman provided, they stepped back and straightened their posture.

"This is Lord Lucas's carriage?! I'm terribly sorry for stopping you! Please proceed!" said the guard as his colleagues opened the gate in a hurry.

I could see the capital through the small gap between the curtains, then shifted slightly to sit closer to Mireille.

"Ambassadors sure get special treatment," I said, looking at Lucas as he sat in front of us. "I would never have made it out of the capital so easily by myself."

"Don't jest, my lady. You found your way out of the capital just fine, did you not?" he answered with a forced smile.

It was all a little ironic.

"How come you have such a small escort?" I asked.

Lucas didn't seem to mind my changing the topic so blatantly.

"I can't help it," he said. "My viscounty may be on the large side, yet I'm not as influential as you might think. I had to pick between numerous escorts and an effective one. It was a bit of a headache."

"So you sacrificed numbers for quality. In other words, your guards are the cream of the crop."

Lucas had only had five guards—an escort far too modest for

the ambassador of a mighty empire. They were all riding on horseback next to the carriage.

"Indeed. I feel much safer with five reliable warriors by my side rather than twenty mediocre blades. A small elite force also costs less to maintain."

"I see... I must say I'm a little confused, though. You're here as an ambassador. Shouldn't the emperor provide you with knights?"

"I'm afraid not," Lucas said, sighing. He pressed his forehead as if he had a headache. "I was a measly noble of the robe not so long ago. My territory and title are recent developments."

When I heard that, I reached a single conclusion.

"The emperor is using you, a young and easy-to-control nobleman, as a shield. On top of that, he sends you to deal with the ever-annoying King Bulat."

"You saw right through me." Lucas laughed, smiling instead of blaming me for being overly frank. "Indeed, you are correct. Despite my ending up in an uncomfortable position, only those can lead to great things if taken advantage of. I don't believe it will happen in my generation"—he shrugged—"but doing well might guarantee my future child becomes a count someday."

◇

After a few days, we finally got out of the wasteland that separated the kingdom and the empire to enter the capital of Lebrick Viscounty.

Along the way, we'd encountered monsters the five guards with us swiftly took care of. Just like Lucas had said, they were strong.

We passed through the gate and went up the main street toward Lucas's residence, which stood at the heart of the city. Some citizens cheered when they recognized the Lebrick carriage.

"You're quite popular here, my lord," I commented.

"I may not look the part, but I treat my people earnestly," he responded proudly.

This scene was a little too dazzling for me.

"This city is full of life," Mireille said, staring through the window. I sensed the admiration in her voice.

"And I noticed various races live here," I added.

About half of the people I saw in the streets were humans, and the other half consisted of elves, dwarves, beastmen, halflings, and

other demihumans. I wasn't used to this since humans made up the majority in the royal capital. The few demihumans there were adventurers, mercenaries, or temporary visitors who weren't citizens. None of them had the same rights.

"The Yutear Empire is very diverse," stated Lucas. "Several nations are under our jurisdiction, and we believe in respecting every culture. Besides, my viscounty is located on the fringes of the empire. Not to mention there's a nearby dungeon that is popular with adventurers."

While the Kingdom of Haldoria technically recognized demihuman rights, the country's long history of human supremacy had hindered progress. Many still discriminated against demihumans and, deep down, didn't see them as equal to humans.

The empire, on the other hand, was a young nation. It had always been diverse and never stifled by the weight of its history. With this in mind, the Yutear Empire was a much more promising place.

After chatting for a while longer, we reached the Lebrick residence. Lucas led me to a room.

"Please use this room for the time being," he said.

"Thank you, Lord Lucas."

I enjoyed the softness of a luxurious bed for the first time in over a month. The following morning, I joined Lucas to discuss the next step. We sat across each other, a table separating us.

"So, Lady Elizabeth, may I inquire about your plans?" he asked.

"My first step will be building myself a decent foundation. While we're on the topic, I have a couple of requests."

"Let's hear them," he said, then gestured to his butler to serve him another cup of tea.

The butler naturally extended his courtesy, so I ate one of the cookies he had brought out.

"First of all, I would like your approval to conduct business in this city," I said. "I will need money to establish myself in the empire and gain power."

"I'll allow it. Knowing you used to manage an influential firm, I believe a promising business will strengthen the local economy."

"Thank you, my lord," I said, bowing to him. "That brings me to my second request. As you know, one cannot hope to start a business with no capital. So, would you kindly lend me a hundred gold coins?"

“A hundred gold coins, huh?” repeated Lucas, putting his hand up to his chin. He seemed to do that whenever he needed to think.

I was asking for a significant sum. With that amount, a commoner family of four could get by for several years. Once I’d estimated Lucas’s tax revenue based on the size of his territory and the state of his residence, I was sure he could easily afford it. What he was considering was whether there was any point in handing out such a sum to a young girl with no influence like me.

“Please take a look at this, my lord,” I said, presenting a piece of paper.

“A magic contract? It’s also of high quality.”

As the name suggested, a magic contract was a covenant that bound both parties. When signed, the contract’s content would etch into your soul and force you to abide by its terms.

The power of the binding magic depended on the quality of the contract. One of poor quality would only make you feel a bit sick if you broke the terms. My contract, though, was of the highest quality because a signatory who failed to fulfill it would die.

“The conditions are... Are you insane?!” remarked Lucas after reading through it.

“Why the fuss, my lord?”

According to the contract I’d handed him, I had to pay Lucas double his investment within a year. If I failed to do so, I would become his slave. He could then sell me to someone else to recoup his losses or assume ownership of my person.

Lucas stared at me like I was a lunatic.

I suppose that in his eyes, I am *a lunatic.*

“One year,” I said. “That’s all the time I need to cover this table in gold.”

◇◆☆◆◇

When I looked at her on that day, ready to gamble with her life, I felt a shiver run down my spine.

I felt like a child who’d lost his parents in the crowd, like a young boy wandering through the darkness, like an adventurer peering into a dragon nest.

Though she had barely come of age, I felt like

I stood in front of a wild beast whenever I looked at her.

Dread filled my heart, yet a spark of excitement bloomed—so small and faint that I almost failed to notice it.

After those cunning aristocrats had used me, I had the impression that my chance to claim glory had finally come. I got a glimpse of its radiant shine.

But I couldn't explain why. All I knew was that this girl held something mysterious that stirred up hope inside me.

Excerpt from the memoirs of Lucas Lebrick Haldoria, Archduke of the Dukedom of Haldoria.

Chapter 2: The Traitre Commercial Firm

I pushed open the door of an old house, but the door cracked apart, leaving me to hold a large piece of wood from it. The smell of dust assaulted my senses.

"This house is in ruins, my lady..." said Mireille.

"That explains the price," I responded. "I never thought we'd even find a building *and* some land for one gold coin."

Then, I threw the large piece of wood to the ground. I'd fix it later... No, that was probably impossible. I'd hire a carpenter.

We were on the edge of Lebrick Viscounty's capital. I had purchased this abandoned building at the Merchants' Guild after registering my new business with Lucas's help.

The place had terrible sun exposure and was far from the city center and the gate. Dead leaves sullied the well, and weeds had taken over the garden.

"My lady, this is no place for you," insisted Mireille, glaring at a large fissure on the wall that let the cold air enter the house.

"There's no choice, Mireille. I only borrowed a hundred gold coins, and we can't waste them. Lord Lucas helped us with the trade authorization, but an address is required to register the firm."

I handed Mireille a dust cloth and picked up a broom.

"M-My lady, please allow me to do the cleaning!"

"I can't let you do everything, so I'll help," I said. "And please stop calling me 'my lady.'"

"B-But..."

"We're fugitives. Let's avoid drawing attention until we've restored our power. In fact... I'll go by Ellie Leis from now on. Just call me Ellie."

"A-All right... Then, um... El-El... Miss Ellie."

I let out a little laugh, then said, "That will do. Shall we start cleaning? Here's to taking good care of our new headquarters and my first step toward revenge."

Although I made it sound like the beginning of something grand, we were simply about to scrub, dust, and pull out weeds from this place... Oh, and fill in that fissure.

◇

After three days of hard work, we'd turned a ruin into a run-down yet habitable house. We had just added the final touch: a rough sign with the name of our new business, the "Traitre Commercial Firm." I hoped to change the sign to a more elegant one quickly.

Either way, we had everything we needed for a proper firm.

"Will we focus on selling cosmetics like before, Miss Ellie?"

As Mireille stated, we'd mainly sold cosmetics in the past. I'd discovered incredible recipes in ancient records and used the Grimoire of Lucifer—the one I usually pretended was called Grimoire of Wisdom in front of others—to decipher them.

I'd even popularized some of them in the Kingdom of Haldoria. Nonetheless, I still had many recipes I had yet to commercialize recorded in my Grimoire of Lucifer.

However, I shook my head and replied, "Cosmetics are sure to interest noble ladies and have a high-profit margin, but I fear we don't have the facilities or personnel for that."

"Then—"

"This will be our first product," I said, taking out a sample I'd made while Mireille was gathering information on the local businesses and influential individuals.

"Soap?"

"Indeed."

"While this soap does seem to be of a higher quality than the one usually sold in the empire, I'm not sure we can sell enough to —"

"This is a stepping stone," I cut her. "Once we build a customer base, we can move on to skincare products and increase our prices. We'll grow our firm gradually. To achieve that, we'll need to contact a few people, though."

I took a piece of paper from the pile of reports Mireille had written for me, then continued.

"First of all, I want you to contact this man."

◆

I'd left to run a few errands, which took longer than expected. The sky was already turning orange, and I started running to get back when I saw the sun setting over the horizon. Suddenly, I collided with someone at an intersection and landed on my back.

I let out a surprised yelp.

"S-Sorry," said the beautiful woman I'd bumped into, extending her hand to me.

She seemed a few years older than me. Her shoulder-length black hair and fierce almond eyes made her look intimidating, but her gentle smile told me she was kind.

"Are you hurt?" she asked. "I'm truly sorry. I was looking for the Merchants' Guild and didn't pay enough attention to my surroundings."

"I-I should be the one apologizing," I said.

After she'd helped me stand up, I dusted off my skirt.

"You said you were looking for the Merchants' Guild, right? Head toward the clock tower. When you reach the city square, you'll see the guild's headquarters."

"Thank you so much. I've just arrived in this city and kept getting lost," said the woman, smiling. "Ah, before you go." She fumbled through her basket. "Please accept this."

“Huh?” I gaped, taking the small packet she was handing me. “What is it?”

“A thank-you gift for pointing me in the right direction. It’s soap.”

“Soap?” I repeated, confused.

“I’m Mireille, from the Traitre Commercial Firm. We recently established the company and will be selling those soap bars. We use a special method from my hometown to make them, and I’m very proud of how they turned out. Do give it a try.”

She was advertising her product, and I didn’t see why I shouldn’t accept it.

“Thank you,” I said.

“The pleasure is all mine. I’ll be going, then. Don’t hesitate to visit our firm if you like the soap,” said Mireille with a mischievous smile.

We went our separate ways, and I returned to the baron’s mansion. My master was a noble of the robe who served under His Lordship, Viscount Lebrick. He and his wife were very kind people. Despite her being one of the most influential ladies in town, she often chatted with us maids.

Somehow, this admirable lady I’d never seen be so intimidating was questioning me.

“Hmm... M-My lady,” I mumbled awkwardly.

“I’ll ask you one more time, Melia. Did the woman who gave you this bar of soap say she worked for a firm called Traitre?”

“Y-Yes.”

Last night, I used the soap I’d received to wash up. The lady of the house hadn’t stopped asking me where I’d gotten it since.

“This soap is obviously of very high quality,” she said.

“I-I thought so too. It foamed really nicely, and the smell was amazing!”

“You said that Mireille was new here, right?”

“Yes, I found her looking for the Merchants’ Guild. Apparently, she’s from another country and just arrived. Her business is new too.”

“I see. Well, this soap is quite something,” the lady said. “I shall get in touch with Traitre at once.”

◇

As Mireille and I walked through the city square, the sun was at its zenith. Most of the citizens were very fond of the landmark and liked to relax by the large fountain at its center. Slightly higher up was a large, modest building that was well maintained.

It was one of the churches of the most widespread religious institutions on this continent, the Church of Ibris. Mireille and I entered through the large open gates and walked into the chapel. A few people were already there, offering prayers to the idol sitting on the altar.

"Good morning," greeted a sister dressed in a tunic.

Mireille and I bowed to her.

"Hello. My name is Ellie, and this is Mireille," I said, "We're starting a business and came to pray for its success. Do you mind if we sit here for a moment?"

"Of course not, feel free," the sister answered.

Shortly after, Mireille and I sat beside the other believers and prayed.

I couldn't tell how much time had passed, but we eventually got up and headed toward the exit. On the way, I saw the sister who'd greeted us talking with another clergyman. I noticed a sacred seal around his neck, recognizing this man was most likely the bishop in charge of this church.

"Oh my, are you on your way home?" asked the sister after spotting Mireille and me.

"We are. Thank you for your warm welcome, sister," I said.

"Please come back whenever you like."

"May God's blessing be with you," the bishop added.

High-pitched laughter unexpectedly rang outside the church.

"Are these children I hear?" I asked.

"Indeed," said the bishop. "We have an orphanage next to the church. The children perform odd jobs in town during the day, removing weeds around the barracks and helping out where they can. They must have just gotten back."

"Is that so?"

"Our liege, Lord Lucas, sponsors us. However, it hardly covers all the fees since we run several orphanages in the territory. Still, I'm ashamed to rely on the children to compensate for our shortcomings."

“Don’t be, Father. I’m sure the children are eager to help because they know how much you care for them.”

“Those are such kind words, my child.”

I took a few coins from my purse to hand them to the bishop and said, “Please allow me to offer a small contribution.”

“Thank you very mu— What?!” exclaimed the bishop, freezing in place.

The five gold coins I’d given him weren’t an amount a commoner could usually donate arbitrarily.

“I-I can’t accept such a large sum!”

“I insist. What would a merchant be without customers? I see future customers in these children. So, you could say that supporting them is a form of investment to me.”

The bishop thanked me again, wiping away the tears that had formed in his eyes. He and the sister walked us to the gates so Mireille and I could leave.

◇

Outside, the sun had already started going down.

“Are we finished with the preparations, Mireille?” I asked.

“We are, miss. The maid from the baron’s house I approached yesterday was the last on my list,” said Mireille.

“How has the response been so far?”

“We’ve already received several inquiries.”

Mireille had casually introduced our soap to the most influential families in the area. As a result, the most alert ladies already had their eyes on us.

“Good. The soap will go on sale tomorrow, as planned. Mark up our product slightly more than the competition and control our stock. Do not sell to just anyone.”

“Will do. But... Are you sure, miss? Quality soap like this could sell at a higher price. Besides, even with just the two of us, we could increase the stocks if we wanted to.”

“Things are fine this way. We’re aiming for brand recognition and ties with influential people by selling to a select number of people.”

As I’d said, this was nothing but a stepping stone. I wanted people to see a bar of soap and immediately think of Traitre.

“Let us make a killing, Mireille!”

◇

"Here are this month's earnings, Miss Ellie."

"Thank you."

I sifted through the documents Mireille handed me. It had been three months since our soap had hit the shelves. After that, we branched out to face lotions, body milk, shampoo, and other related products that kept sales growing steadily.

"Everything has sold out, and we have all preorders booked. Anyone who's heard of our products is bombarding us with requests," said Mireille.

"That means all is on track. Survey all potential customers and only accept a handful," I instructed Mireille. I grabbed a piece of paper, signed it, and handed it to her. "Oh, and please take care of this."

"Of course, miss."

That paper broke down the different donations I wanted her to carry out. Part of the money would go to the church's orphanages, though I also wanted to support a few other charities.

I made a point of donating some of our profits to charities every month. As a result, I was on good terms with the bishop and the sister.

"Shall we head out to eat, Mireille?"

"Yes, miss."

I'd picked up the habit of dining out every evening because we didn't have much time to cook when managing Traitre. But I mainly went out to hear interesting rumors when we ate. As a former noblewoman, I thought visiting restaurants popular with the commoners was a novel experience.

"Ellie, Mireille! Welcome!" the owner of Salamander—the restaurant we just entered—exclaimed while smiling at us.

"Good evening," said Mireille.

"Good evening. It's nice to see you," I greeted her.

Mireille and I sat at the table that was slowly becoming *our* table, considering how often we came here these days.

"We'll have today's special and wine spritzers, please," I said.

"You two are always so polite," she said, then turned to the other customers. "How about learning from them, folks? An occasional 'please' or 'thank you' wouldn't hurt now, right?"

"That's harsh, boss! We're proper gentlemen too, ain't we?"

bellowed a customer.

"If *you're* gentlemen, then I'm a proper lady!"

The middle-aged men, who I assumed were adventurers, erupted in laughter. Yet the owner continued chatting with them while bringing us what we'd ordered.

As always, this place was lively. Today's special was a plate of mashed potatoes with sausages, a loaf of bread, boiled vegetables, and a bowl of soup. They were far from stingy on the quantity, even with the wine I'd ordered. The total came to two copper coins and three iron coins, making it incredibly cheap.

"How is our main competitor doing?" I asked Mireille in between two bites.

"The Gazaru Commercial Firm? They haven't done anything conspicuous," she replied.

"Very well. Keep an eye on them. That soap is our lifeline, and we must be careful," I said, then lowered my voice. "Make absolutely sure no one gets their hands on the recipe."

"I'm aware, miss. The recipe is safe in the firm's safe, so do not worry."

"That's good to hear. Seeing that our brand is finally getting some recognition, it might be time to take things up a notch."

"Indeed. We should be as swift as possible, miss. The clock is ticking for your contract with Lord Lucas."

Afterward, Mireille and I continued talking while we ate. We covered various topics, including the firm, the city, and recent fads. I had more fun now than I ever imagined when I was a proper young lady bound by her duties.

◆

"Damn it!" exclaimed a man, smashing a half-full glass of wine into the wall.

The glass and its content were of the highest quality and would cost at least a silver coin to replace. Still, the violent motion did nothing to quell the rage of Gazaru Jackman, chair of the Gazaru Commercial Firm. His business used to reign supreme in Lebrick Viscounty as the place to purchase cosmetics and toiletries.

Gazaru slammed his plump hands on his desk. For the past three months, the sales of luxury goods sold by his brand had steadily been going down. His high-end soap, in particular, barely

sold anymore.

The Gazaru Commercial Firm offered a wide array of products, and the lack of success of a couple of them was far from enough to deal a serious blow to their profits. This trend was certainly concerning, though.

What truly soured Gazaru's mood wasn't the results of his company. It irritated him that two nameless novices had waltzed in and stolen his most influential customers. He absolutely despised Traitre's methods.

Traitre pretended not to have enough workers to fulfill orders, but Gazaru knew this was only an excuse. They were handpicking their customers, something evident to an experienced merchant like him. The tactic was especially noticeable when most of the customers they refused were unruly. How dare they pick and choose their customers?

Some remaining customers had even begun pressuring him to source Traitre's soap for them. They'd never complained about Gazaru's soap and only quickly changed their tune when Traitre had become all the rage.

Gazaru wanted nothing more than to tell them to bring their complaints to Traitre. Sadly for everyone, these newcomers had secured the support of the baron's wife.

While Traitre had few customers, they had taken the time to build deep ties with high-profile ones. Messing with the company at this time would prove difficult.

"Curse these insufferable brats!" shouted Gazaru, directing his rage at his desk once more.

Knocks on the door pulled him out of his trance. "What now?!"

"E-Excuse me," mumbled the man who entered.

Gazaru appeared even more irritated, clicking his tongue in annoyance before asking, "What do you want, Grantz? Here to bother me for money again? You have guts, seeing as you never do a thing!"

Grantz was Gazaru's accountant, who had recently started having money trouble and kept begging for advances. Gazaru had accepted once but grew furious when the man had had the gall to miss work without any explanation.

"N-No... I... Hmm..."

"Out with it!"

"Th-Th-There's something I...um...thought you'd want to know

so…” he started meekly.

Grantz’s idiotic smile and way of currying favor did nothing to improve Gazaru’s mood. His annoyance had reached a new high even when he listened to what the man had to say.

“I…um…heard the two girls from Traitre talking, and they… They said their soap recipe was in their firm’s safe. You know…that run-down shabby house they use…”

“Are you sure?!” exclaimed Gazaru. “Where did you hear that?”

“I-I saw them at a downtown restaurant sitting behind me by chance. They were whispering, but I know what I heard.”

Just then, Gazaru evaluated Grantz’s words carefully. If he could seize the recipe, he could produce and sell the same soap. Since the Traitre brand started carrying weight, selling his version under their name ensured greater profits. He could pretend he’d bought from Traitre, acting as an intermediary to take a cut and resell them for a price several times what they were worth!

Gazaru casually opened a drawer, took out a small bag filled with silver coins, and threw it at Grantz.

“This conversation never happened,” he said firmly. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-Y-Yes!” stuttered Grantz, crouching to pick up the pouch that had fallen on the ground. He bowed deeply and rushed out of the room.

Gazaru rang the bell that was sitting on his desk. All he had to do was to get in touch with some of his subordinates who excelled at safecracking.

◇

Five months had passed since I’d found refuge in the empire, and Traitre continued its growth.

I woke up in my bedroom of the run-down house I’d purchased a while ago and got dressed. Mireille had already made breakfast, so we sat down to eat together.

As soon as we finished eating and were preparing to make our toiletries by hand, a small bird flew inside the room.

“Miss Ellie, I have this month’s report from the capital,” said Mireille, taking a paper from the bird’s leg.

“What is the news?” I asked.

“It seems that dirty bit— Um, Lady Lockit has officially become

His Highness's fiancée. As for you, Miss Ellie, you've been declared an enemy of the kingdom and are wanted for high treason. They will pardon House Leiston as the duke has promised he'll find you and have you answer for your sins," recounted Mireille, her voice trembling with rage.

"I see," I said. "So, they've decided to protect the royal family's prestige by corroborating Prince Friede's declarations... I doubt our royal musclehead came up with this plan and can only assume this is Duke Leiston's handiwork."

"He's willing to discard his own daughter?!"

"That man would throw me to the wolves without a second thought for his benefit. Duke Leiston is only concerned about the kingdom and the royal family. My disappearance led to him defending the prince's honor at my expense."

Mireille's rage boiled so hot that tears flowed down her face. I rubbed her shoulder affectionately before taking the letter from her and burning it over a candle. In an instant, I threw the soot into an ashbin.

I was naturally outraged as well, but I had already sworn to take revenge. My plan was in motion, and I would trample over them like they'd trampled over me sooner or later.

"Come now, Mireille. We have work to do."

"Yes, Miss Ellie..."

Mireille and I started working on Traitre's products. We usually made items until noon, delivered orders in the early afternoon, and returned to crafting until dinner. Today, however, a banging on the door stopped us in our tracks.

The door was on the verge of breaking apart, so I really wished our visitors would be more gentle.

"Coming!" said Mireille.

The moment she was opening the door, a man in armor grabbed it and slammed it open. A group of several armored men intruded without a word.

"Wh-What do you think you're doing?!" exclaimed Mireille. None of the men answered. Instead, they surrounded us with swords in hand.

"Do not move," said a woman before stepping inside. She wore the Merchants' Guild uniform and a pair of glasses.

"To whom do I owe the pleasure?" I asked.

Thus, the woman took out an identification card, showed it to

me, and stated, “I’m Arte Hilgardie, an investigator for the Merchants’ Guild’s legal department.”

The guild’s legal department dealt with offenses committed by partner companies.

“We suspect your firm, Traitre, is selling toxic soap,” she added.

“Toxic soap?” I repeated.

“Many buyers have reported severe burns and inflammation after using your products,” she said, taking out a piece of paper. “This is a warrant signed by the guild master. Traitre is officially under investigation. You, Ellie Leis, and your partner, Mireille Katarina, are under arrest and must accompany us to the guild’s headquarters for questioning.”

It didn’t look like Arte would take no for an answer.

Mireille looked at me for directions. “Miss Ellie…”

“Fine,” I said. “Although we haven’t done anything wrong, we’ll cooperate with your investigation.”

“Thank you for making my job easy,” Arte said. “If you’ll please follow me to the carriage.”

We boarded the carriage at the behest of Arte and the soldiers, then headed for the Merchants’ Guild.

“I see… Your soap-making process does not appear toxic or dangerous,” said Arte.

We sat in a room at the Merchants’ Guild’s headquarters, discussing the situation. Arte had requested one of the guild’s alchemists, to whom I explained our recipe, and they concluded our product was harmless.

On top of that, we’d never sold anything to the victims. None of our real customers had ever complained about experiencing adverse reactions. After checking our ledgers and confirming that our recorded transactions, remaining stocks, and raw material purchases matched up, Arte had to admit that we were unlikely to be involved in this affair.

“So *this* is the toxic soap,” I said, looking at the item Arte had brought out. She’d apparently gotten it from a victim. “The execution is unrefined.”

“Unrefined, you say?” inquired Arte.

“Well, yes… In fact…” I said, then paused briefly. “No way!”

“Did you figure something out?”

“My working theory is that the person who made this stole part

of our recipe."

Arte tilted her head to the side. "What do you mean?"

"Our soap recipe is so important to us that we separated it into two halves. The first half is inside a safe while the second is always on my person," I explained. "Using only the first half of the recipe will lead to a toxic product. One must perform the detailed steps in the second half so it is safe."

Arte nodded and said, "In other words, the culprit stole the recipe, failed to realize it was incomplete, and sold it under Traitre's name." She nodded again before addressing her subordinates. "Go question the victims and find out who sold them the toxic soap. The culprit is most likely pretending to sell Traitre's products. Trace the materials while you're at it."

"At once!" affirmed the soldiers.

Once they'd left the room, Arte bowed to us in apology.

"While this case is still open, I believe we've established your innocence. If anything, Traitre is another victim," she said. "I'm terribly sorry for putting you through this."

"You were only doing your job," I said. "The culprit should apologize, not you."

"Thank you for understanding... I'll contact you if new information comes to light."

Arte prepared a carriage and had an escort take us back to our house. Mireille and I cleaned up our workshop and wrapped things up for the day, then went out for dinner a little earlier than usual.

◆

"Damn!" Gazaru groaned as he stood in his office. "What's with those ridiculous charges?! This is bad... If they ask our customers, they'll immediately figure out we were behind this! Still, we copied their recipe word for word. How could... Shit! Did these idiots steal a fake recipe?!"

Gazaru was shifting the blame to the people he'd tasked with stealing the recipe when an uproar began outside of his office.

"Please wait!" he heard. "The chair is currently out of the offi __"

"We know Gazaru is here, and we have a warrant. Get out of the way, or we will arrest you for obstruction of justice!"

A few seconds later, a group of men in armor barged into his

office.

“You’re Gazaru Jackman, chair of the Gazaru Commercial Firm, correct? We have a few questions about the toxic soap incidents and have reasons to believe you may be involved in a burglary. Please follow us.”

◇

When I heard they captured the culprit, Mireille and I headed to the Merchants’ Guild.

Arte’s investigation had led her to the Gazaru Commercial Firm, a business with a long history in the city. The chair, Gazaru, had apparently ordered his subordinates to steal the recipe from our safe.

The Merchants’ Guild would expel Gazaru from their organization and sell him as a criminal slave to atone for his transgressions.

But the issue was that his actions had also hurt my firm. Our image had particularly taken a hit after we’d finally achieved some brand recognition.

That was the main reason I’d come to the guild today: to seek reparations. The staff of the Merchants’ Guild led me to the room where Gazaru was confined. My first impression was that he was a chubby man who bore an uncanny resemblance to a toad. He was sitting on a chair, his arms bound behind his back.

Gazaru glared at me as soon as I stepped in. I sat down and stared back.

“Hello. I came to request reparation for the harm done to my firm,” I said.

He sneered, obviously looking down on me.

“I admit I was wrong,” he said, “but I won’t give you a thing. You may not be aware, brat, but the Merchants’ Guild is only allowed to judge offenses committed toward it. They lack the authority to rule over civil cases. That’s the prerogative of the Church of Ibris, so you’ll need to bring an inquisitor if you want my money.”

I ignored Gazaru’s vulgar laugh and exhaled. “All right, then. I shall do just that. Please come in, Father.”

The bishop, in full dress, stepped into the room.

“B-B-Bishop Luis?! No way... How did a brat like her—”

“Watch your words, sinner. Miss Ellie is a devout believer. God will not suffer to have her honor tarnished,” Bishop Luis said.

◆

How the hell had that brat gotten the bishop involved?!

Bishop Luis wasn’t just anyone, he was the only inquisitor in town and was an incredibly busy man. It made no sense for him to bother with such a petty case. Ever since I’d gotten mixed up with Traitre, *nothing* made sense!

The evidence I’d disposed of after stealing Traitre’s recipe had somehow surfaced. All that also applied to the tax evasion I had concealed for years.

I’d hoped to at least retaliate by refusing to pay reparations, but she’d gotten the only inquisitor in the city to show up! With his approval, she could requisition all my assets.

Damn it! I should never have crossed paths with Traitre!

My head drooped. I knew my luck had run out...for good.

◇

Thanks to the bishop’s intervention, they recognized me as a victim and forced Gazaru to compensate me. I obtained his firm and personal assets, including part of the money the guild made by selling him off.

While the Gazaru Commercial Firm got dismantled because of the scandal, I got to keep *everything*. That comprised the operating rights, employees, buildings, and materials. Traitre essentially absorbed Gazaru and grew larger within a day.

People injured by the toxic soap were all cured with healing magic. I even personally sent them real Traitre soap as an apology. They agreed to bury the hatchet when I promised to count them among my customers moving forward.

Mireille and I returned to the Merchants’ Guild a few days later to deal with the last formalities, but Arte stopped us on our way out.

“Once again, let me apologize for the trouble,” said Arte.

“Please don’t,” I responded. “None of this was your fault. In fact, your swift investigation helped us minimize the damage to our brand. So, I’m very thankful.”

Arte smiled and extended her hand toward me.

“Thank you, Miss Ellie.”

“No, I should be the one thanking you, Miss Arte,” I said, shaking her hand.

“There is one last thing,” she added, lowering her voice. “After interrogating Gazaru again, he confessed that someone pushed him to steal from you. He says his accountant, Grantz Carlton, is responsible. Sadly, our hands are tied as we have no proof.”

“I see... Thank you for letting me know, Miss Arte. Since Gazaru’s firm merged with mine, this man is now one of my employees. I’m afraid that, given the circumstances, a new investigation would only add to the confusion and further hurt my firm. Either way, would you mind leaving him to me?”

Arte nodded, then said, “All right. I only ask that you be careful.”

After bidding Arte farewell, Mireille and I headed to the former headquarters of the Gazaru Commercial Firm. A new sign that read “Traitre Commercial Firm” had been put up to replace the previous one.

“We’re back,” I said.

“Welcome back, Miss Ellie, Miss Mireille,” greeted all employees in unison, bowing their heads.

The Merchants’ Guild had already established that these people had nothing to do with Gazaru’s crimes. So, they were allowed to keep their jobs and became my employees instead.

I acknowledged them by waving my hand before entering the main office and sat on a beautiful chair. The furniture Gazaru had been using was quite gaudy, so I had Mireille redecorate the entire office to suit my tastes as soon as I’d gotten it.

“Mireille,” I said.

“I’ll have someone fetch Grantz for you at once,” she said, not needing me to say another word.

I was catching up with some work while sipping the tea Mireille had brought me when a knock echoed.

“E-Excuse me,” said Grantz, opening the door. “Wh-What can I do for you, Miss Ellie?”

His eyes kept darting away from my face. I could tell the man was a nervous wreck and understood it was because his fate was in my hands. I could fire him on the spot and make the reason public so he’d never find another job again. Even if the law couldn’t judge him, I could still destroy his life.

“Grantz,” I said firmly.

I reached into a drawer and pulled out a small bag. Then, I set it on the desk in front of Grantz.

“Here’s your reward for your magnificent work.”

The bag was full of gold coins. A shaky breath escaped Grantz’s lips as he took it, seeming more relaxed.

“As promised, you shall become an executive at Traitre. I can’t promote you right away, but rest assured that I will as soon as things calm down. I’ll inform the Merchants’ Guild I’ve forgiven you because you showed genuine remorse.”

“Th-Thank you so much!” said Grantz, finally letting go of the tension.

I’d asked Mireille to contact him right after arriving in the city, then struck a worthwhile deal with him. As such, he’d been instrumental in taking down Gazaru.

Grantz had encouraged Gazaru to steal the soap recipe, making his greedy boss walk into our trap while dutifully collecting evidence. He’d also “mistakenly” left incriminating documents proving that Gazaru had been committing tax fraud in a noticeable spot for Arte’s men to find.

After investigating Gazaru, I’d discovered his dodgy methods. However, what Grantz had done to help me expose him was just as dodgy. If I turned my back on him, he’d have had no way to force me to abide by our deal.

And yet, Grantz had accepted to work with me despite the risks. I had to answer his dedication in kind.

“Um… Miss Ellie…” he started.

“I know, I know. There’s another promise I must fulfill, right?”

“Please… I beg you—”

“Don’t worry. I won’t go back on my word. Shall we go right now?”

“Yes, please!” he exclaimed, relieved.

“Mireille, ready the carriage,” I ordered.

“At once, miss,” she responded.

We rode the carriage to a small, unimpressive commoner house. Although, I thought it was in a much better shape than the building Mireille and I had been using for Traitre until recently.

Grantz unlocked the door and pushed it open.

“I’m back,” he said.

“Where were you?! You haven’t come home in *days*!” a woman

screamed.

"I-I'm sorry!" apologized Grantz.

"I know a lot is going on at your firm. I understand that, but..." she continued, tearing up. "How could you leave us alone when Lunoa is in so much pain?!"

If memory served me right, the woman—Grantz's wife—was called Luly.

He'd been hard at work for the past few days to ensure our plan went down without a hitch so Gazaru would have no way to worm his way out.

"I apologize," I said. "Work has taken up much of your husband's time. His presence was crucial, and I fear I couldn't give him time to sleep well recently."

Luly finally noticed me.

"Who... Who are you?" she asked, puzzled.

"Do forgive me for the late introduction. I'm Ellie Leiston, chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm."

"Huh?!"

"I've heard about your daughter's condition. Please be assured that Mr. Grantz was busy doing his best for her sake."

"O-Okay..." she said, unconvinced yet inviting us inside.

Grantz's daughter had been badly hurt in an accident a few months ago. Regrettably, hiring someone to cast healing magic came at a very steep cost—one that he and his wife couldn't hope to pay even if they sold everything they owned.

Still, they had done everything in their power to ease their daughter's suffering and had used up all of his savings buying potions.

"Why are you here?" Luly finally asked.

"I can use healing magic, and I came to treat your daughter," I said.

"R-R-Really?!"

Her expression shifted from surprised to worried in a split second.

"We... We don't have the money to—"

"Don't worry about that. I'm here to repay Mr. Grantz for the excellent work he accomplished for the firm in these difficult times. I won't ask for anything more in return."

I took a book out of my bag.

"What's that?"

“A magic item that will strengthen my spell. If I use the mana stored inside it, I can cast a powerful healing spell,” I explained.

Naturally, it was a lie. I’d simply materialized my Grimoire of Beelzebub and put it in my bag ahead of time.

Because I didn’t have an affinity for light, I couldn’t use healing magic. The same went for Mireille. Despite being a light magic user, she specialized in illusions, not healing. With the Grimoire of Beelzebub, though, I could bypass my limitations. Fortunately, I recorded the most powerful healing spell of the Kingdom of Haldoria’s archbishop...

Grantz led us to his daughter, Lunoa. She was sleeping on a bed in the back of the room.

The girl had deep scars on both of her eyelids, probably having lost her sight. Wounds covered her arms and legs too. She had a high fever and, from what I’d heard, hadn’t regained consciousness since the accident. However, the potions were barely keeping her alive.

I extended my hand toward her and activated my grimoire.

“Heal,” I chanted.

A blinding light covered her body before disappearing. Her wounds had vanished completely, and she slept with a peaceful expression.

“Healing magic takes a toll on the patient’s body, and she won’t wake up immediately. But please don’t worry; she’ll be fine. Make sure to feed her nutritious dishes when she wakes up,” I related.

“Oh, thank you!” exclaimed Luly.

“Thank you so much, Miss Ellie!” added Grantz.

The couple appeared understandably astonished by the effects of my spell. I hadn’t actually used Heal, but High Heal, the version used by the archbishop, who only ever officiated in the royal capital. Thus, it was far more powerful than a regular healing spell.

I’d told them a made-up story about putting magic in a book but still asked Grantz and his wife not to say anything about what had happened that day.

And so, the Gazaru matter had come to a close.

Just like that, I had turned my small firm into a large company and seized already established trade routes, a large customer base, and loyal employees.

The groundwork is in place, and all that’s left is to reap the benefits. I can expand my business in one go!

◇

Lucas pinched his own cheek in shock, then frowned as if he had a terrible headache.

“It’s only been a little over six months...” he whispered, staring at the low table between us.

Gleaming gold coins I’d piled up covered the table to the point that some had fallen to the floor.

“Indeed. But I had the money ready and didn’t see the point in waiting,” I said.

“How in the world did you turn a hundred gold coins into this mountain of gold in half a year?”

I laughed and said, “Didn’t I tell you that I’d make helping me worth your while?”

Lucas exhaled heavily and controlled his expression.

“Lady Elizabeth... No, I suppose I should call you Miss Ellie now,” he started. “You may wander the empire as you see fit, including the capital.”

He’d given up on addressing me as a noble lady.

“Oh my. Are you sure about this?”

“I know you’re wanted for high treason. So, I doubt this is all a ploy and have decided to trust you,” he said, looking somewhat defeated.

“Why, thank you for your trust, my lord,” I replied, bowing elegantly.

◇

After taking my leave from Lucas’s property, I went back to my office. I was busy signing financial statements when Mireille spoke up.

“I brewed some tea for you, miss.”

“Thanks, Mireille,” I said, accepting a cup from her.

I took a sip and handed the paper I’d just signed to Mireille.

“A donation for the church?”

“Yes. Either you or I should take care of it in person,” I said.

I’d started donating to them so their busy inquisitor would make some time for me whenever I needed him. The Church of Ibris was one of the most powerful and widespread religious institutions in the Western Continent and Central Continent, with plenty of believers in the Northern Continent.

Hence, I hoped to maintain good relations with them in the future through this easy method. Clergy members also needed money, all the more with children to feed. Although you couldn’t exactly pay them in exchange for a specific service, donations still went a long way. The church would protect me, granted I didn’t sin.

I’d just signed yet another document and added it to the pile when someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

A ten-year-old girl stepped in. “I hope I’m not interrupting. I brought you the documents about the imperial capital.”

“That is appreciated, Lunoa.”

The girl was Grantz’s daughter, Lunoa, who had awakened surprised to find that she could use a unique spell. It was a peculiar type of personal magic rarer than attribute or ordinary magic.

Though unusual, exposure to large quantities of mana sometimes impacted the mind and body so much that an untapped ability would suddenly surface. It was most likely what had happened when I healed her.

Lunoa had obtained the spell Item Analysis, a tremendously useful ability for a merchant. There was no harm in keeping such a talented girl by my side. So, I recruited her as my apprentice and personally taught her magic.

I took the papers she was handing me and gave her some documents to give to Grantz in exchange.

"The imperial capital..." whispered Mireille.

"We finally have Lord Lucas's permission to travel and will be heading there soon," I said. I gathered mana in my left hand. "Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Belphegor."

My mana gradually took the shape of a blue tome. I flipped through the pages until I found what I was looking for and stood up. With a silver coin in hand, I walked to the center of the room while Mireille took a few steps back until she was against the wall.

"O great spirits, let your wings guide you through the distant azure sky," I chanted. "O messengers of the God of Wind and Travel. I offer you this silver coin in accordance with our contract. Heed my call! Summon: Saint Birds."

The silver coin I'd been holding turned to fine powder before disappearing in the air. A shiny magic circle appeared, and fifteen white long-tailed birds flew out.

My Grimoire of Belphegor recorded contracts I'd made with otherworldly entities, such as spirits or demons. This aspect allowed me to use their powers in exchange for a fair price.

I attached a small piece of paper to each of the birds.

"Fly to them," I said. "I'm counting on you."

Mireille opened the window, and the beautiful birds took off together.

I'd need the support of my former business partners in the capital. Even though I had asked them to scatter when I left the kingdom, the time had come for us to unite again.

Thus, I watched the Saint Birds until they faded on the horizon before turning to Mireille.

"We're marching into the imperial capital once everything is ready."

◇◆☆◆◇

Lunoa: Great Witch, I humbly thank you for saving my life. Please allow me to accompany you on your

journey, my esteemed teacher.
Silver Witch: Who can tell whether glory awaits at the end of my path? This trail of corpses may very well be the only thing I leave behind. Are you sure you wish to walk by my side, Lunoa?
Lunoa: Yes. If only darkness awaits you, I shall chase it away for you.
Silver Witch: All right. Let us go on this adventure together. May our journey bring light to this world.

Excerpt from the play *The Tale of Lunoa Carlton, Merchant of the Wilderness* by Birk Shell. From the opening sequence of act 1, "Lunoa Meets the Silver Witch."

Chapter 3: To the Imperial Capital

I'd been in the empire for almost a year already.

Following the absorption of Gazaru's company, Traitre grew incredibly fast. Most of the other cosmetics and toiletry firms of the viscounty had declined, overwhelmed by the quality and popularity of our products.

I was always vigilant for good opportunities and had acquired quite a few businesses. One by one, these companies had become Traitre's subsidiaries.

At the moment, I was on my way to a meeting to discuss the firm's bright future. Ever since I took over the Gazaru Commercial Firm, I'd started picking out promising individuals. Some were from Gazaru's firm, and others from different companies that ended up under my control. After several months, I'd finally assembled a team of capable executives.

But I'd also brought in a few people from my old firm back in the kingdom. They rushed to Lebrick Viscounty after seeing the message I'd sent them using the Saint Birds. Another few of my comrades were currently on their way to join me. Meanwhile, others had traveled to various countries to lay the foundation for Traitre's expansion.

"Forgive me for the wait," I said, entering the meeting room with Mireille.

My subordinates all stood and bowed politely.

"Sit down, please. I know you're all busy, so thank you for coming. As such, I gathered you today to discuss Traitre's next step. I have a rather important announcement to make."

I looked at everyone's faces individually before continuing, noticing they all seemed somewhat tense.

"Traitre will be expanding to the capital."

My sudden declaration garnered a couple of different reactions. Some gasped, others nodded with serious expressions, while the rest smiled confidently.

"I'll head to the imperial capital first. In the meantime, I'll leave

our affairs here in your capable hands," I said as I took a sip of tea before adding, "Grantz."

"Yes?" he asked.

"You'll be my proxy while I'm away."

"M-M-Me?!"

"I'm not asking you to do everything alone, so don't fret. Once I permanently shift the firm's headquarters from the viscounty to the capital, I will make you the branch representative. Don't disappoint me."

"I-I won't!"

I turned to the petite woman sitting next to Grantz.

"Stia," I called.

"Yes?"

"I'll appoint you as Grantz's secretary and count on you to support him the best you can."

"Understood, Miss Ellie."

Stia used to work with me in the Kingdom of Haldoria. She was the perfect choice to assist Grantz, who still lacked experience.

"All right, then. I'll leave the rest to you. Take good care of Traitre in my absence."

◇

We discussed a few other topics before I ended the meeting and returned to my office with Mireille. Later, she and I sat opposite one another in the reception area.

"Will the two of us head to the capital alone, miss?" asked Mireille.

"Let me see," I said, pausing to think. "Lunoa should come along. It'll be a good experience for her."

"Certainly, miss. How would you like to travel?"

"A small carriage will do."

"Didn't you want to bring some samples along for advertising?" asked Mireille, puzzled.

"I still do," I answered, "but I'll use the Grimoire of Mammon so we don't have to carry them around."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it'll be fine. I still don't want to disclose my powers to everyone. But I don't mind telling trustworthy people about my Divine Artifact. If I remain overly cautious, I won't get my revenge."

The Grimoire of Mammon recorded my possessions. I could store any of my belongings inside it and take them out at my convenience.

Perhaps I wouldn't have had to borrow money from Lucas if I'd stored my fortune in the grimoire when I lived in the kingdom. At the time, I was so desperate to hide the true abilities of my Divine Artifact that I barely used it. When I escaped, I only had emergency rations, a bit of change, and some medicine. A part of my money was in my firm's safe, and the rest was at the Leiston Estate. Regardless, I hadn't exactly had the leeway to stop by and retrieve it.

I'd stopped handling things that way, though. A bountiful amount of money and precious goods were safe in my grimoire.

"Send a few people to the capital ahead of us," I ordered. "Have them look for a suitable property for the firm and conduct some research. I want to know everything about the cosmetics market in the capital. We'll leave a little later, right before the social season opens."

"Understood, miss."

Soon, the social season would start. During this period every year, the nobles held balls, dinner parties, and other social events to deepen their links, keep each other in check, or form alliances through weddings.

The noble of the robe that remained in the capital throughout the years would naturally be present, and most feudal lords and their families also traveled to the capital at least once every three years to socialize. Lucas, the lord of Lebrick Viscounty, would make the trip this year and should already have arrived.

In addition, the nobles usually invited a handful of prominent merchants and famous adventurers to their gatherings—the best advertising location one could dream of.

After getting our affairs in order, Mireille, Lunoa, and I left Lebrick Viscounty. Mireille had found us a small, plain wagon drawn by a pair of unremarkable horses.

Despite the length of the journey, we'd barely brought any luggage along and sped through the roads.

Lunoa had been confused to see us load so little onto the wagon, so I told her about my ability. She knew nothing about my Divine Artifact and took my explanation at face value. Informing her of the rest of my powers eventually would probably be okay.

The only items I hadn't stored in my grimoire were Mireille's and Lunoa's personal belongings and emergency rations.

My Grimoire of Mammon was very convenient, but it couldn't store just anything; its powers only extended to *my* possessions. Although I owned Traitre and, by extension, our promotional materials, I didn't have ownership of Mireille's or Lunoa's things. I also could not store living beings; liquids or gases had to be put into containers first. I couldn't just suck water out of a river with my grimoire.

At first, our journey went smoothly. We exited the viscounty and passed through two territories before entering a third one with roads in an awful state.

"Wow! The wagon is shaking!" exclaimed Lunoa.

"It sure is," I agreed. "In the empire, feudal lords are to maintain the roads in their territory, are they not? This one is doing an abysmal job."

"It's my first time leaving Lebrick Viscounty, so I didn't realize other places could be like this."

"Most commoners never do unless they're merchants or adventurers. Or pilgrims," I added. "They also tend to travel a lot." I inched forward toward Mireille, who was holding the reins, and told her, "Tread carefully, Mireille."

"I'm aware, miss," responded Mireille.

"Why did you tell her to be careful?" asked Lunoa with a puzzled look.

"Distribution of goods can only happen when the roads are adequate, which allows the economy to prosper. You understand that, right, Lunoa?"

"Yes, Miss Ellie. Proper distribution raises the standard of living and tempts people to buy more. This improvement increases demand, so merchants and adventurers flock from other territories to seek profit. The territory then collects more taxes and prospers as a result. That's why lords are supposed to take good care of their roads, right?"

"That was a perfect answer," I praised, patting her head.

She'd remembered my lessons.

"Can you guess what happens when the roads are in disarray?" I asked.

"Hmm..." started Lunoa. After a few moments, she answered slowly, "Goods don't flow well, so...hmm... Well...rural areas and

remote areas...can't get what they need?"

"Indeed. What else?"

"Farmers might struggle to ship their products to cities, and transportation would become pricier so... Oh! I know! Food, medicine, and other daily needs become pricier for everyone!"

"Correct," I said, nodding. "Take salt, for instance. This area is so far from the sea that people have no choice but to import rock salt from neighboring territories. While the transportation cost is steep, a further hike would make salt prices skyrocket. Still, people couldn't stop buying salt, could they? Instead, they'd tighten the purse strings and give up on luxury items, dealing a blow to the economy. Naturally, salt and other such necessities would become even more expensive in rural areas. Farmers who can't make ends meet or purchase them would turn to crime. This forces merchants to hire escorts, which drives up prices. It's a vicious cycle."

"I see... How come the lord of this territory doesn't maintain the roads, then?" inquired Lunoa.

"He probably doesn't care about his territory, or he skimps on maintenance costs to save money. Either way, he's a fool."

As always, the masses had to pay the price for their ruler's stupidity.

Although I'd said several times that the king of Haldoria, Bulat, was a muscle-brain, he was at least not a negligent ruler. He was aware of his limitations and knew to delegate or seek counsel. That man wouldn't commit blunders as long as he had competent advisers.

Friede was nothing like his father, though. Not only was he a fool, but he was a tyrant in the making. The people of Haldoria would undoubtedly suffer when he ascended the throne.

Granted, I didn't really care about the fate of the citizens anymore. I just hoped the merchants who'd treated me well would be fine.

Well, merchants are resilient. I'm sure they'll be fine, I thought.

According to my spies in the royal capital, most merchants I was close to had made up reasons to leave the country after my exile or were preparing to do so.

"Then when you told Mireille to be careful, it was because—"

An arrow cut through the air, and I pushed Lunoa out of harm's way. She yelped and almost fell from the wagon. I supported her and glanced at Mireille, who had flicked an arrow away with a

dagger.

When the horses neighed and stopped, armed men walked out of the bushes.

"It was because soldiers never patrol these overgrown roads properly, so brigands take over to do as they wish."

"You live dangerously, girlies," sneered one of the men. "Didn't think to bring an escort? Aren't you scared of running into men like us?"

"M-Miss Ellie..." whispered Lunoa, shivering with fear.

I patted her head once more and said, "It's okay. Everything will be fine." Then, I jumped from the wagon and added, "Mireille, protect her."

"Yes, miss."

Mireille took Lunoa in her arms and jumped down as well. She stepped forward, ready to defend Lunoa and the wagon.

"Would you look at that? Gonna fight us all alone, girly?" asked the burly man as I approached.

"I am. Are you dissatisfied with me?" I said.

"HA HA HA HA!!! You've got guts! Don't worry, we'll take good care of your friends too."

What a vulgar laugh. "Will you now?"

I waved a finger, and four sharp icicles sprung from the ground, piercing through the archers. The spell I'd used was called Ice Needle.

"Huh?!"

"What?!"

"S-Silent Casting?! She's a high-level mage!"

"Shit! Surround her! Don't let her use magic!" the leader screamed.

At his command, the men charged at me with swords in hand.

"Good call," I said, unsheathing my sword. "Too bad it won't save you."

I swung my sword once and cut three men in half before they could understand what was happening.

My rapier, Flügel—the Winged Blade—was a national treasure of Haldoria that had slumbered in the royal treasury for years before they had offered it to me as a reward for pushing back the Empire during the war. It was the sharpest magic sword I knew of, crafted using materials from a heavenly dragon. While the blade was so thin you could see through it, the sword could cut through

mithril as easily as if it were butter. That remarkable property had a cost—Flügel was anything but durable and couldn't be used to parry. If I wasn't careful, it'd shatter on the spot.

Only the finest swordsmen could wield this prized sword, and it felt wasteful to use such a treasure against mere brigands.

Oh well...

"What the hell?! Damn!" exclaimed a man while another shrieked. Seeing their comrades die in an instant had unsettled them.

"Still standing? How impressive," I taunted.

I gathered mana at my feet and leaped forward. My spell, Quick Motion, allowed me to move faster than the eye could see. And I closed the distance with the vulgar brigand who'd just sworn.

"Huh?" he let out an idiotic look on his face. I immortalized his expression by beheading him.

One more to go.

"W-W-Wait! Stop! Please! You've won! I surrender!"

"Do you now?" I said.

"I-I'm just a farmer! I couldn't afford to live with all these taxes and..."

"You can spare me the excuses. Nothing you say will change the fact that you're a criminal. As a merchant, I can't go around forgiving brigands, now can I?"

"No! W-Wait! I'll never attack anyone again! I promise! So please—"

I sliced his throat without listening to his nonsense.

Blood splattered as weak gurgling sounds formed in his throat. After a few moments of agony, he eventually died.

I turned and checked in on Mireille and Lunoa. There were two dead brigands lying at Mireille's feet, but she and Lunoa seemed fine.

"I-Is it over?" asked Lunoa.

"Yes. Are you hurt?"

"N-No... Erm... Did you...k-kill them?"

"I did, Lunoa. Brigands are just like goblins and orcs. They use force to take the fruit of merchants' labor and sometimes their lives. Others will suffer the fallout if you let them go out of pity, so always kill a brigand when given the chance. I'll teach you how to fight, eventually. You must be strong enough to protect yourself. I hope that when the time comes, you won't hesitate."

“O-Okay.”

Once we took care of the brigands’ corpses, we hopped onto the wagon and went our way.

◇

A little after noon on the following day, Mireille suddenly called for me, “Miss Ellie.”

I paused the lesson I was giving Lunoa. “What is it?”

“Please take a look,” she answered.

So, I followed her line of sight and noticed someone waving at us in the distance.

“She’s trying to hitch a ride, isn’t she?” I said.

Sometimes, people tried to hitchhike when they couldn’t find a carriage that departed at a good time or were too poor to pay for it. They’d start their journey on foot and try to get a ride along the way by giving a small sum of money. Adventurers and mercenaries even offered to guard the convoy instead.

Brigands occasionally pretended to be hitchhikers to lure people in, so most travelers never stopped for hitchhikers.

“Please stop the wagon, Mireille,” I said after thinking for a while.

I was quite confident in my and Mireille’s fighting abilities, but we had Lunoa to worry about. Usually, I wouldn’t have allowed a suspicious man to join us. The hitchhiker, however, was a young woman whose clothing indicated she was a member of the clergy.

I couldn’t ignore a sister of the Church of Ibris, could I?

◇

“Phew! You guys are lifesavers! I was starting to think I’d have to walk all the way to the capital!” said our new companion, scratching her head. She had a blonde bob cut that looked like gold threads under the sun.

“My pleasure. We’re heading in the same direction, so it’s no problem,” I said.

“I’m super-duper thankful! God must have put you in my path!”

Tida, as she introduced herself, was a friendly sister with a very casual manner of speaking. Though she did not look the part, she’d already come of age already, and I was shocked to discover we were the same age!

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have much on me right now… I wish I could thank you properly for giving me a ride, but…” she trailed off.

“Don’t worry about it, Sister,” I said. “I’d never take money from a member of the clergy over something like this. If you don’t mind me asking, are you a walking sister?”

“Something along those lines, yeah! Exactly. I’ve gone through a bunch of nearby villages. So, I thought it was time for a change of pace.”

Walking clergymen traveled the land on foot, visiting remote villages to cure people with their healing magic. Places like these didn’t have doctors or apothecaries, let alone mages capable of healing. In most cases, the village elders’ concoctions were the closest thing to medicine they could get their hands on. As such, walking clergymen were welcome visitors.

It was rare to see a sister take up that kind of role, though it wasn’t unheard of either.

“I admire your devotion, Sister. Still, I can’t believe we’re the same age.”

“No way! You’re the amazing one, Miss Ellie! I can’t believe you’re the chair of a firm at such a young age! Oh, and no need to be so polite! Just call me Tida!”

“Are you sure? I’ll take you up on that, then.”

◇

We passed two villages after picking up Tida and were getting closer and closer to the following territory when brigands surrounded us again.

"Brigands? Again?" I said, sighing. "Good grief, the lord of this place is incompetent."

I was in a terrible mood when I got off the wagon. "Mireille. Protect Lunoa and Tida, please."

"Of course, miss," responded Mireille.

"No need, no need. I'll tag along," blurted Tida.

I was about to ask Tida if she was sure but stopped when I remembered she'd been traveling alone this entire time. If she'd survived so far, she probably could hold her own in a fight.

And so I nodded. Then I activated Quick Motion to launch myself at the first enemy. I struck the brigand in the solar plexus with my scabbard, making him lose consciousness.

"You bitch!" roared another brigand.

I took his arm with a swift swing of my blade before sending him flying. He fell to the ground and passed out as well. Fighting in such a roundabout way was a pain but I couldn't go around killing people in front of a sister.

One of the Church of Ibris's commandments was "Thou shalt not kill." While I didn't think anyone would blame me if it were a matter of life or death, I still wanted to be careful not to slay anyone if I could help it. Obviously, I'd kill to defend myself if I was in danger, even in front of a clergywoman.

I hit the last assailant until he passed out and looked over at Tida to see how she was faring.

"Die, you trash!!! I bestow upon you divine punishment! By the will of God, take it!" Tida was using her iron staff to bash the head of a brigand repeatedly.

I returned to Mireille and Lunoa's side and whispered, "He's already dead, isn't he?"

"Long dead," said Mireille.

The man's skull had caved in, and he was convulsing with each hit. I looked at the other corpses she'd left in her wake and noticed

that most of the contents of their skulls had spilled onto the grass.

They were all dead.

Considering her thin arms, Tida had most likely used magic to enhance her physical strength. Her staff had broken through the men's bones as if they were twigs.

"Phew! I'm all done with mine!" she exclaimed.

"Good job..." I said.

"Oh my! You've killed none of them, Miss Ellie! How come? Are you a pacifist at heart?"

"Not exactly..."

"Ah! Did you perhaps hold back because of me? Sorry for hindering you!" said Tida with an awkward smile before walking toward the brigands that lay unconscious on the ground. "Brigands are a safety hazard, though. They'll attack others if we let them go, so you can kill them. Do you mind if I finish them off for you?"

"No...not at all."

She brought her staff down on each of them, one by one. When she arrived at the last one, the man groaned weakly and opened his eyes.

I must have held back a little too *much*, I thought.

"My, my. You picked a terrible time to wake up," said Tida.

The man inspected around him and shrieked, "W-Wait! Please wait, Sister! I promise I'll turn over a new leaf! I'll devote myself to helping others, so please! Give me a chance to do better!"

"No can do," said Tida, refusing to listen to the pleading man.

"Why not?! I heard the Church of Ibris always gave sinners a second chance! Please! Have mercy!"

"God is benevolent, as you say. People are prone to sin. But God is merciful and forgives those who repent sincerely."

"Th-Then—"

"But brigands aren't people in my book. God's mercy doesn't extend to you!" she exclaimed, raising her staff over her head.

"No... Stop!"

"Suffer His wrath!" she yelled, cracking his head open with her staff. The battle ended just like that, as Tida was strong and showed no mercy.

We started gathering the corpses and collecting whatever helpful items we could find. A repetitive noise behind me diverted my attention from my share of work only to look at Tida.

"Only a teeny tiny bit more..." mumbled Tida. She seemed to

try to pull something out.

"Tida? What are you doing?" I asked.

"Yeah? Ah! Finally! Look! I found something great!" she exclaimed, showing me a small...thing covered in blood.

"That's...a gold tooth?" I asked after staring at it for a few seconds, trying to figure it out.

"Yep! Never thought I'd find something like that among those savages! They had quite some money, and their weapons were good quality! We lucked out!"

"I'm not sure I'd say that..."

I couldn't help but be a bit put off by Tida, who happily showed me a bloody tooth. Regardless, I created a Water Ball so she could wash her hands and the gold tooth she took as a reward.

◇

"One more over here, ma'am!"

"Coming!" the dogkin waitress answered Tida cheerfully.

After we'd left the previous territory, we entered a well-maintained domain and had no other unfortunate encounters. We even made our way to a rather large city, where we found an inn and were having an early dinner.

"Phew! That hit the spot!" said Tida. "I never got to enjoy my ale in the countryside!"

"Should you really drink this much? You're a sister, aren't you?" I asked.

"It's all good! Alcohol is the water of life that God gave us! Haven't you heard the saying? And God said, 'Thou shall drink!'"

"You'll incur God's wrath, you know," I warned her.

Tida had been gulping down ale after ale in a way that didn't befit a person like her. I also had no idea how so much alcohol even fit in her small frame. Although the Church of Ibris didn't explicitly forbid alcohol, I'd never known a member of the clergy to drink so much in public!

"Nonsense! God showed me His grace! Besides, my wallet is positively bursting thanks to the brigands He put in my path!"

"Oh my, did you sell everything already?" I asked.

"I sure did! As soon as we got here! I had some time on my hands while you booked the inn. Let me tell you, it fetched a pretty penny! Oh, and don't worry about your share. I'll give it to you

later!”

“No need. You can keep the money, Tida.”

“Huh?! Are you sure?!”

“By all means. Think of it as an offering.”

“M-Miss Ellie!!!” screamed Tida, jumping on me and bawling her eyes out.

“G-Go away! You’ll get snot on me!” I complained.

Mireille and Lunoa watched us banter as they ate.

“Miss Ellie looks like she’s having a lot of fun,” Lunoa told Mireille.

“You’re right. She used to have competitors and never had friends her age. And so, she always hid her feelings behind a tough facade. But these days, I feel like she’s finally started smiling from the bottom of her heart,” said Mireille. “You should try this, Lunoa.”

“It’s so good!”

“This soup has simmered bugleweed and stuffed intestines, but the secret ingredient is miica juice. They grow a special variety of miica fruits in this city.”

“So that taste was from miica fruit... I heard they didn’t spread much outside their producing areas because they were prone to damage due to their high water content.”

“I like the smell, though,” I commented. “It could be a nice fragrance to add to our cosmetics. I’ll see if I can buy a couple of fruits later to do a few experiments.”

Our noisy group continued to eat and talk well into the night.

◆

“Your Highness! Please reconsider!” exclaimed an official, rushing into Prince Friede’s office with a proposal in their hand.

Friede glared at him as he munched on a biscuit from the most famous confectionery in the capital.

“How noisy... What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Your proposal, Your Highness!” answered the official, presenting the papers to Friede.

“The one about the food distribution? What’s the issue? We do that all the time!”

“Your Highness... Have you looked at the budget? Going through with this plan will drain the national treasury instantly!”

“You’re being ridiculous. That woman used to distribute food every week, didn’t she?”

“Lady Elizabeth funded those campaigns herself. She never used treasury money unless she carried out His Majesty’s orders. And she also tried to provide the poor with jobs so they could support themselves. Charity isn’t about distributing food with no proper planning!”

“What a drag! Let them starve, then!”

“Y-Your Highness, please wait!”

“Shut up!” roared Friede, storming out of his office.

The official let out a deep sigh.

◇

The wagon’s wheels kept spinning and spinning as we moved toward an imposing gate. We could barely see the entire capital, even from the top of the small hill we were on.

Lunoa stared in wonder at the city and its tall defensive walls. She’d never left the viscounty before, so it was her first time seeing such a large city. While she drove the wagon, she passed the reins to Mireille to join Tida and me in the back. Despite her limited driving experience, she performed well on a straight path. Many people lined up in front of the gate. Our group had to undergo an identity check to enter the city just like them.

Many guards stood at the gate, and the controls were swift. Before long, it was our turn.

“Next.”

“Hello,” said Mireille, moving the wagon forward. “We’re merchants from Lebrick Viscounty.”

“Your guild card, please.”

Guild members received cards to prove their affiliation. Thus, Mireille, Lunoa, and I showed him ours.

“Ah, I’m a sister of Ibris,” said Tida, taking out an amulet with the crest of the church. “They picked me up along the way.”

People often needed to pay a tax to enter a city where they did not live. Guild members were exempt from that rule. We paid a yearly membership to the guild, and the imperial treasury received a percentage to pay said tax in advance. As a result, we were free to travel with no additional fee. Tida, as a sister of Ibris, was also exempt from certain taxes, including this one.

We entered the imperial capital and soon found ourselves in the public square.

Tida jumped down from the wagon and said, “Well then, it’s time to say bye-bye. Thanks for everything!”

“Thank you for brightening our journey,” I said.

“I hope we meet again, Miss Tida,” said Mireille.

“Take care!” added Lunoa.

Tida waved cheerfully and ran off. We then checked into our lodging, a fine hotel in the center of the city.

I sat on the sofa to take a breather and waited for Lunoa to bring me a cup of tea before discussing our plans.

“M-Miss Ellie,” started Lunoa. “C-Can we really stay at such a luxurious hotel? I—”

“Get used to it,” I cut her. “We’re here to do business, remember? People will look down on us if we stay somewhere cheap. Who knows who is watching us and when?”

“Oh, I get it...”

“Will we head out again today?” asked Mireille.

“No, let’s use the remainder of the day to rest. We’ll meet up with our comrades who arrived ahead of us tomorrow. Oh, and we’ll get in touch with Lord Lucas. He should be in the capital as well at the moment.”

“Understood, miss.”

We spent the afternoon and the evening resting comfortably in our room. The next day, we woke up and got ready to meet our colleagues.

“I was waiting for you, Miss Ellie,” greeted an older gentleman after knocking at the door.

Despite not contacting him, he’d figured out that I’d arrived. Arnaud Langley, a man with swept-back graying hair, wore a well-adjusted butler outfit with no creases.

He had served a noble family of the Kingdom of Haldoria for a long time until his masters had passed away during an epidemic. The title had gone to distant relatives of theirs, but the new head had refused to keep Arnaud in his employ, citing his age as a reason. I’d recruited him after he’d found himself out of a job.

Back in the kingdom, he managed my firm’s building.

I’d told Arnaud to head to the imperial capital and lay the groundwork while waiting for me when I left the kingdom. But I had yet to inform him about my new identity as Ellie Leis. He

clearly hadn't needed me to spell it out for him. As always, he was a very competent man.

"Miss Ellie, I've prepared a suitable selection of buildings for you to view. I've also sent someone to request a meeting with Lord Lucas Lebrick for you."

"You're as efficient as always," I praised him. "The messenger you sent to Lord Lucas won't be back immediately, so let's focus on finding a property first."

The firm building would become Traitre's face in the capital, meaning I had to make the right choice.

I hoped to purchase two buildings, one office where I'd also reside and hold meetings while the other was a shop customers could enter. In both cases, these places had to look good and reflect positively on the firm. For the latter, a good location was a must.

"This is a fine building," I commented.

The realtor that Arnaud had summoned showed me a large mansion in a wealthy neighborhood, close to the noble district where nobles of the robe and feudal lords resided. While the mansion hadn't been built at the center of that neighborhood, it was still in an advantageous spot.

From what I'd heard, it used to be the secondary residence of a baron who'd parted with it because he couldn't pay for its upkeep. Even though it required some work and was over the budget I'd initially set, it was well worth it. One didn't often run into such good opportunities.

After looking around briefly, I notified the realtor I wished to purchase the house. He was surprised to see a young girl make an instant call on such an expensive property, but he quickly smiled and handled my request.

Now that we had settled the issue of my residence-slash-office, I had to find a firm building. I sold cosmetics and toiletries, and my main target was noblewomen. In the future, I hoped to develop products even commoners could purchase, but for now, I focused on a more affluent customer base that could easily afford my products.

Because of that, Arnaud had selected a large building located next to the noble district so that we could turn it into a high-end store. When considering the size and the location, I could not help but think it was expensive.

The building used to be home to a business and a luxurious hotel. It had considerable space to park carriages and an impressive

number of rooms.

Nobles weren't fond of walking through the cluster to pick up the items they were interested in purchasing—that was how commoners shopped. They either called the vendor to their residence or expected to be shown to private rooms and waited. Since we hoped to cater to noble customers, having different rooms would be very convenient.

I signed the contract, asked the realtor to introduce me to a good remodeling contractor, and returned to my hotel.

The messenger Arnaud had sent to Lucas was back with an answer. Lucas would make some time for me tomorrow.

"This means we'll be rather free this afternoon," I said.

"I shall get started on furniture shopping," said Arnaud.

"Perfect, thank you."

Arnaud could undoubtedly manage that alone, so I simply handed him a pouch full of gold coins.

"What should the rest of us do?" I asked. "Any ideas?"

"I do have a request, miss. I'd like to enlist some help."

"How come?"

"While we have plenty of employees, we're in dire need of domestics."

"Of domestics?"

"Indeed, we'll need people to tend your residence in the capital. Besides, you will need a personal attendant. I wish I could do that myself, but I fear I won't have the time to take care of you with Traitre expanding, miss," explained Mireille. "I'd like to find someone who can assist me first, then we can worry about the rest of the domestics."

"Fair point," I said. "We'll definitely need more people."

Mireille was brilliant and perfect as my waiting maid. Yet she was an irreplaceable worker for the firm. Hence, she couldn't be at my side around the clock. I hadn't spared that much thought, but Mireille obviously had.

"We could post a job offer at the Merchants' Guild," I suggested.

"I don't mind doing that for the domestics who'll work under Arnaud. However, I'd worry with a perfect stranger by your side all day."

"I see..."

"May I suggest purchasing a slave instead?"

Slaves were workers that could be bought and sold. A magic

contract prevented them from betraying their master, which would put Mireille's mind at ease.

"A slave, huh?"

One could separate slaves into two major categories. First were the criminal slaves, who had committed minor offenses and often worked at mines for a limited period. Meanwhile, those who carried out serious crimes had their civil rights stripped away and were forced to perform dangerous tasks until they died. Most had even been used to test new medicine.

Debtor slaves were people who'd been sold or who had sold themselves because they couldn't repay their debts. Unlike criminal slaves, the law strictly protected their civil rights. Killing or letting them die intentionally was prosecuted just like any murder. Slave owners had a legal duty to keep their slaves alive...on paper, that is.

In most cases, unless someone brutally slaughtered their slave, they wouldn't be in any trouble.

Obviously, I had no intention to do any of that. I agreed with Mireille that a slave sounded like a good alternative.

"All right, let us visit a slave shop."

◇

Mireille and I had lunch at the hotel before heading to the neighborhood where most slave shops were. It was close to the slums, known to be rather dangerous, so Lunoa held Mireille's hand tightly.

We walked into the first shop we encountered. The owner greeted us and took us on a tour, showing us dozens of slaves crammed in small, dirty cells. The conditions were far from sanitary, and I could tell at a glance that they barely fed the slaves; they were skin and bones.

Both of us understood this was the way the world worked and that, in a way, slavery was a safety net. Yet, how they treated these people left such an impression on Lunoa that she hid behind Mireille's back and averted her eyes the entire time.

"Thank you for your time," I told the owner as we left, "but I'd like to take some time to think."

"We couldn't find anyone suitable," said Mireille.

"Most slaves are children sold by their parents or workers who lost their jobs. We'll struggle to find outstanding talents."

“I’m sure talented individuals do end up as slaves from time to time. But they won’t be easy to find, as you said.”

“Let us try another shop,” I suggested. “Lunoa, are you all right?”

“I-I’m fine...” stuttered Lunoa.

I stroked her hair gently as we headed toward the next shop.

Even though we tried several shops, we couldn’t find anyone we liked. The sun had already started setting when we reached the last shop on our list.

It was nothing like the other places we’d visited. The storefront was neat and clean, and two guards in armor stood at the door. I hadn’t immediately noticed but they both had marks near their necks—they were slaves.

Unlike the slaves we’d seen in other shops, they were muscular and looked healthy.

“Welcome to the Cedric Commercial Firm,” saluted a guard. “We’re a slave shop. How may I help you today?”

I hadn’t expected such a burly man to speak so politely, and it took me aback for a second.

“We’re looking to buy a slave,” I answered.

“Of course, miss. I’ll go get someone to show you inside, so please wait a moment.”

As I watched the guard enter the shop, I said the name “Cedric” over and over again in my head, until suddenly I remembered where I’d heard it. This was the business of Cedric Luins, the Educator.

Cedric Luins was a member of the Yutear Empire’s Merchants’ Guild Council, composed of seven eminent merchants that held the financial world in their palms. Their influence reached all the way to the heart of the government, making them more powerful than a fair amount of the nobility.

The guild’s grand master and head of the council was Count Albert Guide, the Seer. Others in the council included the empire’s greatest blacksmith, Gaien Drafan, known as the Divine Artisan; the inn tycoon Lotton Flywok, the Clairvoyant; the financier who terrified the nobility, Darc Hokins, the Chief; the genius doctor from the east, Yuuka Kusunoki, the Dark; the queen of the red-light districts, Hilde Callard, the Silver Butterfly; and the slave trader who even provided slaves to the imperial palace, Cedric Luins, the Educator.

The guard came back with a maid in tow.

"I apologize for the wait. Please follow me," said the maid, bowing elegantly before leading us inside the shop.

The maid also had a slave mark at the base of her throat. She led us to a lavishly decorated parlor and invited us to sit on the sofas. She then brought us some black tea. Her tea had fine leaves, and the rich taste showed she was adept at brewing tea.

After a short while, there was a knock on the door. The maid opened it, and a man entered.

"I'm terribly sorry for the wait," he said with a gentle smile. "I'm Cedric Luins, the chair of this company."

I couldn't help but be surprised, as I hadn't expected the Educator to welcome us in person.

As I opened my mouth to introduce myself, Cedric said, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Ellie Leis, Miss Mireille Katarina, and Miss Lunoa Carlton."

Even though the Educator had a serene smile, I suddenly felt I shouldn't underestimate this man.

"How do you know our names?" I asked.

Cedric's expression didn't budge as he responded, "How could I not have heard of Traitre and its prodigious growth? You've gone from a small business to a powerhouse in less than a year. While Lebrick Viscounty is far from the capital, such feats are bound to spread rumors, don't you think?"

"Is that right? I'm honored to learn that a renowned merchant like yourself has heard of me."

"I'm also honored as I finally get to meet you, Miss Ellie," he said, extending his hand.

I shook it, returning his smile.

We hid our true intentions under a smile and a couple of pleasantries. I hadn't experienced this in a while, and it felt somewhat nostalgic.

I truly doubted a member of the council was interested in a small firm that only operated in a viscounty on the edge of the Yutear Empire. Cedric had kept an eye on me for another reason, and I could only think of one: he knew who I really was.

He didn't let any hints slip through, though. Instead, he swiftly shifted the conversation to the nature of my visit, "So, what kind of slave are you looking for today, miss?"

Mireille took over and explained to him what we were looking

for.

"I see. So you need someone to serve and assist Miss Ellie."

"Exactly. Any race is fine, but the slave must be a girl. And Miss Ellie often has to travel, so someone strong enough to follow her around would be a plus."

"All right, I see," said Cedric. "I'll get a few slaves that fit that description ready for you, so please wait a moment." He bowed and exited the room.

We enjoyed our cups of tea as well as some confections the maid brought us while we waited. Eventually, Cedric returned.

"We're all set. Would you mind following me?"

"Not at all, please lead the way," I said.

Mireille, Lunoa, and I followed Cedric through the firm's corridors, tastefully decorated with paintings and sculptures. I could tell they had cleaned up this place thoroughly.

Several large rooms with no doors connected to the corridor, meaning we could see inside. In the first one, several children—slaves, I assumed—were sitting at their desks listening to an elderly slave giving an arithmetic lesson. Another room had a group of young girls learning needlework from an old lady.

I looked through one of the windows into the yard and saw a group of burly men swinging their swords in unison. Their clothing was plain, though the men were well-groomed, with their hair and beards carefully maintained.

"Your way of handling slaves is very different from what I've seen at other firms," I said.

"Most firms are all about lowering the costs to increase their profit margins. I have a different approach in which I increase the slaves' value by ensuring they're well educated," said Cedric. "I believe anyone would agree that a learned slave who can read and count is worth more than an ignorant one. The same goes for any other skill, so my goal is to make sure that every slave that goes through my company unleashes their full potential. After all, while slaves are products, they aren't vulgar tools. They're people. Only when you guarantee they're healthy, educate them properly, and provide them with a good environment where they thrive can they live up to their true value. Naturally, our prices are higher than our competitors, but I'm happy to say that many understand that value."

Cedric's ideas were groundbreaking. He was trying to break

away from the notion slaves had to be unqualified workers, and I thought his logic was sound.

The quality of his slaves proved itself many times, and that had become his brand. Some of his competitors must have considered copying his business model, but training slaves was expensive. Competing with Cedric's firm would have seemed impossible unless you had tremendous funds.

"This way, please," said Cedric, leading us into a simple room with only a few pieces of furniture—a table surrounded by chairs.

As soon as we sat down, a young woman entered. She appeared to be a slave Cedric had prepared for us. Once we finished interviewing her, another girl took her place. We repeated this process several times.

The slaves were all dressed in fine clothes and acted with decorum one would never expect from a slave. *They must have received training to serve customers*, I thought.

"This is the last one," said Cedric as a young girl entered the room.

She didn't seem any older than Lunoa—perhaps around ten. The girl bowed to us, even if she was a bit stiff compared to the others. Her cat ears shivered while her tail swayed uncontrollably, showing us she was probably stressed.

"M-M-My name is M-Misha Tail," the catkin blurted. She blushed and quivered, probably embarrassed that she'd fumbled her words.

Always being an excellent salesman, Cedric immediately stepped in to help her out.

"Excuse her," he said. "This is her first time meeting with customers face-to-face, so she appears nervous. As you can see, she's still young and lacks experience compared to the other slaves you've seen. However, I can assure you she's a fast learner. Because she's a catkin, she doesn't have much mana and can only use Physical Boost. Her physical abilities are fantastic, nonetheless. She'll handle traveling just fine. I wouldn't recommend using her as a bodyguard, although she's a decent enough fighter to protect herself."

"Interesting. Any fighting experience?"

"Her parents were peddlers and apparently taught her swordsmanship during their travels. We've trained her further after she became a slave. According to her teacher, she's more or less at the level of a beginner adventurer."

Apparently, brigands had attacked Misha and her parents. Her father had died on the spot, and her mother had been severely wounded. The brigands had taken away all their money, which forced Misha to take on debt to pay for her mother's treatment. Sadly, she hadn't survived. Out of options, Misha had gone to Cedric out of her own volition to sell herself into slavery.

All in all, her self-defense skills set her apart from the rest of the girls I'd seen. She also had a lot of room for growth.

I glanced at Mireille, who nodded back in agreement.

"I'll take this girl, Mr. Cedric," I said.

I pricked my finger with a needle and touched Misha's slave mark. Cedric then activated the unique spell called Slave and transferred Misha's ownership from himself to me.

"We're all set. She's yours," he said.

"Thank you very much."

"You can conceal the mark on her neck with magic if you'd like. The mark on slaves owned by slave companies and criminal slaves must be visible at all times. But the masters of privately owned debtor slaves are free to hide it unless they visit the imperial palace."

"That's good to hear," I said, resting my fingertip on Misha's mark again. I poured a bit of magic into it to make it disappear.

“Serve your new master as well as you can, Misha.”

“I-I will, Master Cedric! Thank you for taking care of me until now,” said Misha, bowing to Cedric.

She seemed to mean it. Unlike the slaves I’d seen in other shops, it was plain to see that she respected Cedric.

I see Cedric succeeded in building good relationships with his slaves, I mused.

After bidding Cedric farewell, we made our way back to the hotel. By the time we got there, the sun had long set.

“You’re free to do whatever you want for the rest of the evening,” I said. “Mireille, take care of Misha, please.”

“Yes, miss,” replied Mireille.

“I-I look forward to working with you, M-Miss Mireille,” stuttered Misha.

“Likewise. I’ll start your actual training after Arnaud finishes preparing the residence. I’ll teach you what you need to know about Traitre and how to attend Miss Ellie.”

“Okay!”

I’d leave Misha’s training to Mireille and Arnaud, but I needed to figure out an appropriate wage for her. While she was a slave, and I didn’t technically need to pay her a salary, I could at least give her some pocket money. Her productivity and motivation would drop if I made her work without holidays or wages.

Besides, if Misha proved to be a good worker, I wouldn’t be opposed to freeing her as a slave and hiring her as a regular employee instead.

I went to bed and promptly fell asleep while thinking of the matters I had to attend to soon.

◇

“It’s been a while, Miss Ellie.”

“Indeed, it has, Lord Lucas.”

The next day, I visited the Lebrick residence in the capital to meet with Lucas.

“Excuse me,” said a maid as she set down cups and plates full of baked sweets in front of us.

“Oh my!” I exclaimed when I noticed that my cup had the most unexpected beverage. “I didn’t expect to be offered coffee. How rare!”

“I have a newfound appreciation for it,” remarked Lucas.

Coffee was a popular drink on the Southern Continent, made by roasting coffee beans. The beans didn’t grow on this continent because of the climate differences, revealing Lucas had most likely imported them. They usually came with a hefty price tag.

“If you dislike it, I’ll have tea prepared for you instead,” he offered.

“Thank you for your concern, but there is no need. I’m quite fond of coffee as well.”

I enjoyed the deep aroma of the dark beverage as I brought it to my lips. The rich bitterness and slight sourness filled my mouth as I appreciated the fruity notes hidden underneath after a few moments.

We discussed the weather and our recent endeavors as part of small talk until Lucas cut to the chase.

“I had an audience with the emperor yesterday.”

“Did you present the imperial family with my gift?”

“Of course.”

I’d given Lucas deluxe beauty sets to present to the women of the imperial family on my behalf. For men, I had prepared hairstyling products and eau de cologne.

Lucas continued, “I sent the emperor several letters to let him know about you, but he still summoned me to hear it in person...”

“Forgive me for the trouble.”

“Well, I can’t say I wasn’t expecting it. I readied myself on the day I decided to help you escape.”

“May I inquire what the emperor had to say about me?”

“He’s decided to keep an eye on you for now and expects regular reports. However, he’s deemed your actions thus far beneficial to the empire and will not interfere.”

“I was starting to fret, but that is most reassuring. I’m sure the emperor won’t find fault with me in the future. After all...I still have every intention to crush my homeland while contributing to the empire’s prosperity.”

“I do not doubt you at all...”

◆

Godwin Yutear, the man who stood at the very top of the Yutear Empire, sighed.

Late into the evening, he had set down his quill and stretched to relax his shoulders. He finally finished with his work for the day.

"Thank you for your tireless work, Your Majesty."

The emperor nodded and handed to his secretary the document he'd just completed. He left his office and headed to the imperial family's living quarters, his personal guards in tow. Every time he crossed paths with a maid or a soldier, they stopped to bow respectfully to him. And so, the emperor showed appreciation with a flick of his wrist each time without stopping until he reached his destination.

"You can leave now," he told his guards. "Thank you."

"Yes, Your Majesty! We wish you a good night!" exclaimed guards with a bow.

When the emperor entered the living room, he found his wife and daughter engrossed in their conversation.

"Oh! Father!"

"You've worked hard, my lord."

"I did. I'm quite worn out! What were you two discussing?" asked the emperor.

"We were talking about the shampoo, hair products, and perfumed balm that Viscount Lucas gifted us earlier!"

"Indeed! We tried them earlier, and they're so different from what we normally use!"

The beauty products the young noble had brought had deeply impressed the empress and the imperial princess. These comments reminded the emperor of his conversation with Lucas.

A year ago, Lucas had helped a young lady from the neighboring kingdom flee to the empire. What a high-profile individual that lady was! Not only was she the former fiancée of the crown prince of the kingdom, but she also used to be deeply involved in government affairs.

From what the emperor had heard, her homeland's decision-makers had declared her a wanted criminal and were searching for her relentlessly. It was plain to see the girl was a crucial asset to them, and she was now in his hands.

According to Lucas, the lady was hell-bent on getting revenge and was currently building her strength with that sole goal in mind. The emperor didn't see any issues with that, as her quest would ultimately benefit the empire.

A sharp pain in his stomach pulled him from his thoughts,

making him groan.

"Father, are you all right?" inquired the princess.

"I'm fine. Can you bring me my usual medicine?" asked the emperor.

"Of course, father."

Godwin was a grand emperor with strong leadership and decisiveness—or so his people thought. In truth, he was a delicate and sensitive man.

Everyone considered him an ambitious mastermind for increasing the empire's territory during his rule. The truth was that one could attribute most of his achievements to luck.

All in all, Godwin was neither a good nor bad emperor. He'd simply done his best to preserve the land he'd inherited from his father. As luck would have it, Godwin had acquired land after successful counterattacks against countries that had previously attacked him or had taken over abandoned monster-riddled regions. Before he knew it, the empire had become this gigantic state.

"Your medicine, father."

"Thank you," he said, swallowing it and washing it down with a big glass of water.

The genius doctor from the eastern archipelago, Yuuka Kusunoki had created the medicine he took. Now that he'd gotten used to it, he couldn't do without it.

"If that Lady Elizabeth grows more powerful, she'll surely benefit the empire. But Lucas's influence will grow as a result," mumbled Godwin.

A voice came from the entrance. "Father, are you still worrying over the fact that you placed him on the border?" Godwin's son, Okyst, had just stepped in.

"How could I not? Sending him there was the same as ordering him to become this nation's shield. Lucas must resent me."

"You're too negative, father," retorted Okyst. "While you did put him in a difficult position, you've also recognized and rewarded his achievements fairly. I'm sure Lucas knows that too."

"You think?"

"Absolutely. Besides, getting acquainted with Elizabeth Leiston has been good for him. I've heard that his viscounty's tax yields skyrocketed in the past year."

"That's true, but..."

"He's also shown that he's a great ruler, so I think you should

grant him a higher peerage soon, father," he added.

"Well... Perhaps you're right."

Godwin sat with his family after his son helped him collect himself and had to listen to the wonders of Traitre's toiletries for hours.

◇

I looked around, holding a glass of wine, noticing aristocrats wearing dazzling party dresses.

It had been a while since I'd mingled with high society. Unlike my time in the kingdom, I didn't have the pressure of carrying the fate of the nation on my shoulders, finally discovering how easygoing and agreeable parties could be.

"Miss Ellie, I'd love to introduce you to some of the ladies. May I take up some of your time?"

"Of course, madam," I said.

The social season had started in the capital, and I was attending one of the many parties happening during that time on Baroness Melanie's invitation. She was one of the most influential noble ladies of Lebrick Viscounty and was well-connected in the capital.

Baroness Melanie was also one of Traitre's best patrons since we'd launched the business. She'd even invited me to her tea parties in the viscounty several times.

After I heard that she and her husband would travel to the capital for the social season, I asked her to introduce me to the ladies there. Fortunately, she had happily accepted and was helping me advertise Traitre.

"Miss Ellie! We've heard so much about you from Baroness Melanie!"

"I was so surprised to see the baroness for the first time in years, only to find her looking more beautiful than ever!"

"We'd love to try your cosmetics too, miss!"

After a short introduction, the topic shifted to Traitre's cosmetics.

Baroness Melanie had always been famous in high society for her beauty and cordial manners, but she'd recently gotten even prettier. Now that the ladies knew her secret, they were eager to get their hands on my products.

"Traitre is in the process of opening a branch in the capital," I

said. “But we’re a small firm and operate on a membership system. Seeing you’re the baroness’s friends, I’ll prioritize you when accepting new members.”

“Oh! Would you, really?”

“That’s so kind of you, Miss Ellie. And thank you for introducing her to us, madam!”

“I can’t wait for your store to open!”

Our production capacity was quite high. However, having a membership system allowed us to increase the value of our products by making them rare. Besides, it made the status of a member desirable and exclusive, driving interest up.

This strategy also allowed us to give back to Baroness Melanie. The ladies who obtained their membership through her ended up owing her. She grew her influence that way, which gave her an incentive to keep advertising Traitre.

“I’d love to send all of you some samples of our product,” I said with a business smile.

You had to strike while the iron was hot. Now was the time to guarantee the ladies’ interest in Traitre didn’t wane.

Although Baroness Melanie offered to take me home in her carriage, I politely declined. My cheeks felt hot and flushed from the alcohol, and I wanted to walk it off. I strolled through the capital’s streets alongside Mireille, reveling in how the night breeze caressed my skin.

“The capital is so serene at this time,” I said.

“It feels like an entirely different place without the rowdiness of the day,” said Mireille.

We made a few detours and ended up near the marketplace. During the day, it was always one of the business places in the city.

All of a sudden, we heard a man scream, “Come back, you bitch!”

“A quarrel?” I noted.

“Even in the capital, the back streets are far from safe,” said Mireille.

“That woman might be in danger... Let’s take a look. I’d feel bad if something happened to her and we did nothing.”

“But your safety...”

“Come on. Some hoodlums could never hurt us. You know that.”

“All right...”

I dragged Mireille to the back alley. We ended up in a small public square where a group of thugs were surrounding a young woman.

"Nowhere left for you to hide, huh?"

"Did ya think we'd let you get away unscathed after what you pulled?!"

"We're gonna sell ya off to a brothel, you damn bitch!"

Mireille and I stepped forward, ready to go help her when suddenly—

"You're starting to get on my nerves!" yelled the girl. "What did I do, huh?"

"Pretending not to know? You cheated! That's what you did!"

"If you don't want us to hurt you, you better give back the money!"

"The hell?! D'ya even have proof I cheated?!" she exclaimed.

"Stop playing dumb!" roared one of the men, raising his fist.

Before he could punch her, she dived into his arms, swept his leg, and spun him in the air until she slammed him into the ground.

"Argh!" moaned the man in pain.

"You bitch!"

Another ruffian tried to attack her, but she caught his fist in her palm.

"What the?!" he shouted, shocked.

He didn't seem to understand how that could have happened, yet Mireille and I could see the mana surrounding the girl's hand.

"Humph!" she let out, kicking the man in the stomach.

He passed out on the spot. Seeing his comrades taken down so effortlessly, the last one took out a knife.

"Ice Bullet!" I chanted.

"What?!" screamed the man as the shards of ice I'd sent flying his way knocked the knife out of his hand. The girl took advantage of his confusion to punch him in the chin.

"You're not hurt, are you, Tida?" I asked.

Surrounded by three unconscious bodies was a young woman I'd met in the past—Tida. She had traded her sister robes for a set of ordinary clothes.

"Miss Ellie! Miss Mireille!" she exclaimed when she saw us. "Boy, you saved me here! Thankies!"

"I'm sure you would have managed, considering what we just witnessed," I said. "And? Why were they chasing you?"

“They convinced themselves that I’d cheated at cards and—” She suddenly paused. “Erm, I mean... Right! I was at a tavern...you know, preaching and spreading the word of God until these guys suddenly attacked me! Out of nowhere!”

What a lousy excuse, I thought.

“I see. So you were gambling, huh?” said Mireille, her cold stare piercing through Tida.

“N-No! You got it wrong! I just showed them how powerful the love of the almighty was by drawing the right cards! And then they gave me an offering!”

“That’s called gambling.”

“She definitely *was* gambling,” I said.

After a long pause, Tida begged, “P-Please don’t tell the church!”

She didn’t even dare meet our eyes.

We continued our night walk in Tida’s company, who was also returning to her inn.

“I see! So you’ll open your shop in the capital soon, huh?” asked Tida.

“Yes,” I answered. “I’m advertising the brand at parties while we wait for the remodeling to finish.”

“Parties? Like noblemen parties?! They must have amazing food and, above all, excellent alcohol, right?!”

“Well, yes. Serving delicacies and rare ingredients is one way the host can show off their economic power, so nobles usually go all out.”

“The nobles sure have it good! Us commoners could never live like that!”

“That’s not exactly true. There are plenty of nobles of the robe who don’t even have territories and have to save frantically to afford the social season,” I explained. “Appearances are vital to nobles, you see. From the outside, it might seem they live in luxury every day. Most live just like wealthy commoners.”

“For real?! I was so sure that noblemen were all super-duper rich!”

“Well, it depends. Some nobles of the robe actually have jobs, you know?”

“And *your* job is to suck all their money out of them,” she said, giggling.

“Exactly,” I confirmed.

While chatting, we reached Tida's inn.

"Well then, we're off," I said.

"Bye! Oh! Wait! I'm going to leave the capital soon!" said Tida.

"Oh my. Is that so?"

"Yeah. I won enough money at ca— Erm... I received enough alms, thanks to the pious people of the capital, to fund my travels. And I'll rescue the poor lambs who've lost sight of our Lord."

"I see. Where are you headed?"

"I'll probably visit all the villages around here and be back now and then to stock up. So, I'll swing by your shop when it opens!"

"I look forward to seeing you there," I replied.

And so, I bade farewell to my new—and somewhat unruly—friend.

◆

Bulat sat in his office, surrounded by piles of papers, a distant look on his face. With Elizabeth absent, he had more than twice as much work on his plate.

He rubbed his temple in an attempt to soothe his headache and said, "Sieg, don't you think we could have Lady Roselia from House Fadgal—"

"Your Majesty, we've discussed this already," the prime minister cut in.

"But the daughter of a duke would make for a much better crown princess than that brat..."

Roselia Fadgal, daughter of Duke Fadgal, used to be one of the candidates for crown princess.

They had chosen Elizabeth to become Friede's fiancée at birth, but a royal marriage was a serious matter. As such, Bulat and Sieg had prepared several backup choices in case Elizabeth couldn't assume the position or passed tragically before coming of age. Among them, Roselia had been the best by far, second only to Elizabeth. Since Sieg's daughter had proven herself and remained perfectly healthy, they had eventually dismissed the other ladies.

"Lady Roselia is already engaged, Your Majesty. You're even the one who arranged it to reward her for her efforts during the selection process of His Highness's fiancée. We can't mess with a noble lady's engagement because it suits us. Elizabeth's escape already dealt a blow to the crown's reputation and this would make

our situation far worse."

"That's true..."

"We're imposing on Lady Roselia's goodwill enough as it is, so please be careful not to antagonize her."

"Right..."

A high-pitched metallic noise echoed as the two weapons collided. The knight released his training sword, letting it fly into the air before landing on the ground.

"I-I give up!" he exclaimed as the tip of his opponent's spear pressed against his neck.

Friede lowered his spear and sneered at the man. "You're out of practice! You should be ashamed to call yourself a knight!"

"I-I apologize, Your Highness! Thank you for your guidance!"

"You'd better train like your life depends on it!" He seemed pleased to see the knight bow to him and walked away, grinning.

The prince was in a good mood after disciplining his knight. He washed off his sweat before returning to the training grounds to further talk with his lackluster knights.

When he approached, he heard voices from the knights' changing room.

"The prince is out of control these days."

"Tell me about it. Losing to him on purpose every time is such a pain..."

"Not like we have much of a choice. Winning might have ended with you getting sent to the border like Connie. But losing and flattering his ego is the smart thing to do."

"With a father like his, he should be plenty talented, though."

"He's never had a hard day's work in his life. Talent can only take you so far, you know? If he worked half as hard as Lady Elizabeth, he'd be way better already."

"I know, right?"

"Ha ha ha!"

Friede clenched his teeth. He wanted to storm into the room and hack them with his spear. Yet the fallout would be dramatic, even though he was the prince.

Rage burned within his eyes, but he forced himself to leave. He stomped on the delicate carpets that decorated the corridors, his coarse behavior unbecoming of a man of his rank.

"Elizabeth, Elizabeth, always Elizabeth! I'm their prince, not

her!”

These knights weren’t the only ones who kept bringing up that hateful woman’s name. The civil official, the maids, the gardeners, and even the cooks couldn’t go one day without complaining about her absence.

“She’s a wanted criminal! A damn traitor!” shouted Friede as he opened the door that led to his private quarters. “How dare they compare her to me.”

“Welcome back, my prince,” greeted Sylvia, her face poking out from the drawing room.

“Sylvie! Gorgeous, as always.”

“Why, thank you, my prince.”

Since she’d officially become his fiancée, Sylvia Lockit spent most of her time in Friede’s private quarters.

At first, the officials had arranged for her to attend princess lessons. Only a few days had passed, and she stormed out crying to complain to Friede. He then used his influence to modify her schedule so she would only study for a tenth of the time planned.

“Do join us, my prince!” exclaimed Sylvia.

Friede made his way to the drawing room, and the woman sitting with Sylvia stood up to greet him with a bow.

“It’s been a while, Your Highness.”

“It has, Chris.”

Chris was a merchant that Sylvia’s family, the baronial house of Lockit, had introduced to him. He and Sylvia enjoyed the foreign items that Chris brought them, and they trusted her enough to summon her to his private quarters.

Sylvia coaxed Friede to buy her a few trinkets, and after they settled their business for the day, the topic shifted to small talk.

“I see. So the people of the castle dared belittle you.” Like most apt merchants, Chris was a good talker, and Friede confided in her about his recent troubles. “How deplorable. They should serve the country, yet they disregard their prince to praise someone who tried to stage a coup.”

“You get it, Chris.”

“You Highness,” added Chris after thinking for a while. “How about you show them your dignity as a royal?”

“My dignity? And how would I achieve that?”

“That’s a good idea, my prince,” stated Sylvia. “Although, I’m also not sure how to proceed.”

“The best way to show your might would be through battle,” declared Chris.

“So you’re saying I should perform a feat of arms, is that it?” asked Friede.

“Yes. The people long for a strong hero who’ll protect them. If you lead troops and exemplify yourself on the battlefield, no one will dare look down on you anymore.”

“In battle…”

“The only hostile nation in the vicinity is the empire but waging war against them isn’t exactly realistic with the current nonaggression treaty. The impact wouldn’t be the same, though I suppose the easiest way would be to subjugate monsters and grow your prestige.”

“Monsters, huh…?” whispered Friede, mulling over Chris’s suggestion.

After she left, Friede took Sylvia on a walk for a change of pace. They walked through the corridors until they ran into someone who made Friede’s face immediately sour.

“My. Hello, Your Highness, Lady Sylvia.”

The lady who’d just greeted them had sumptuous golden locks and fierce red eyes. While red dresses were difficult to wear because they could appear vulgar, she pulled hers off magnificently.

She bowed gracefully and smiled at the pair before adding, “Thanks to a certain someone, we’ve all been losing sleep and working ourselves to the bone. But you and your fiancée seem to have the time to call for merchants… How carefree.”

Sylvia gasped as Friede shouted, “Don’t you dare disrespect me, Roselia!”

“Disrespect you? You say the funniest things! I’m fairly certain that only *respectable* people ought to be respected. You wouldn’t happen to think *you* deserve mine, right?”

“I’m your prince,” roared Friede.

“You’re so dull. You were born lucky, sure. Don’t you have anything else to boast about?”

“You’re just a duke’s daughter! How dare you speak like that to me?!”

Roselia concealed her mouth with her folding fan and chuckled. “And yet this country can’t run without borrowing the strength of this measly duke’s daughter. What a joke. You seem clueless, so allow me to enlighten you. Unlike another ducal house I won’t

name, House Fadgal has no intention of wagging our tails to the royal family like obedient dogs."

Friede groaned.

The ducal House of Fadgal was an illustrious house that had long been in charge of the army. Their soldiers were weaker than the royal knights but there were far more. While the royal family was technically in charge, they could not afford to make an enemy out of House Fadgal.

"Anyway, enough small talk," said Roselia. "Unlike a certain someone, I'm a busy person. You see, I've recently been appointed special aide to the crown prince."

She snickered.

"Special aide to the crown prince," she repeated, barely bothering to conceal her laughter. "I feel bad for His Majesty. He created a new charge because his son is so useless that the boy can't figure out his work."

Friede clenched his teeth and glared at her, but he did not rebuke her.

Roselia then looked at Sylvia who had been hiding behind Friede's back the entire time. The baron's daughter shrieked, intimidated.

"Still, I must say I'm disappointed in Elizabeth. How did she lose to someone like you? Perhaps you're such a small fry that she didn't even notice your existence." Roselia laughed at the pair even as they remained silent. "Good grief. I feel like a fool for squabbling with Elizabeth over such a man." She muttered to no one before walking away, not bidding them goodbye.

Friede's meeting with Roselia had soured his mood, and he gave up on his stroll with his lover. Instead, he stormed into his office to get his work out of the way.

He looked at his desk and clicked his tongue. Since he hadn't paid much attention to it, the pile of documents had doubled. He allowed himself to fall heavily on his chair and picked up the first paper on the pile. It was about monetary aid meant for one of Haldoria's vassal nations.

"You! What is this?!" spat Friede.

"Wh-What do you mean? Is something wrong, Your Highness?" a civil official spoke up.

"Why do *I* need to decide on the amount of the aid?! Can't you do it?!"

“I’m terribly sorry but...only a royal can decide such a thing and—”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses!” he screamed, throwing the piece of paper at the civil official’s face.

Despite his reactions, these matters were indeed Friede’s responsibility. Until now, Elizabeth had always contacted all involved parties to negotiate these beforehand so that he’d just need to sign.

“You’re all so useless,” he whined. “And our vassal countries are damn parasites! Why do we need to send them money all the time?!”

Friede suddenly remembered his conversation with Chris as he complained about the situation.

“Wait... This means *I* am the one who gets to decide what we give our vassals...” he whispered.

“What did you say?” the official asked.

“Nothing! Focus on your work and shut it!”

◇◆☆◆◇

[illegible]

[illegible]shall[illegible]

If you refu[illegible]spared.

I believe you will[illegible]wise deci[illegible]

Frie[illegible]Haldor[illegible], Crown Prince of the K[illegible]dom of Hal[illegible]

Excerpt from *Burnt Letter*.
Document preserved in the archives of the Dukedom of Haldoria.

Chapter 4: War Knocks on Lebrick Viscounty's Door

I was working in my new residence, which also doubled as Traitre's new headquarters. After getting through a fair amount of the papers piled up on my desk, I took a break to stretch.

"I made you coffee, Miss Ellie."

"Thank you, Misha."

Misha happily wagged her tail as she poured me a cup.

"Lunoa, Mireille, let's all take a break," I said. They'd been fighting with their respective stacks of paperwork for long enough. I saw her pour two additional cups of coffee and added, "Misha, do take a breather after this."

"Traitre is doing very well in the capital too," Lunoa pointed out.

"We are. I managed to get a few influential ladies on board at that party, and it's done wonders for us."

As a burgeoning company, Traitre's biggest weakness was its productivity. However, we recently made a lot of progress in addressing that problem. I'd brought that up a few times at social gatherings, and several aristocrats had jumped at the chance to invest. Honestly, their money had gone a long way in sustaining us.

After I moved to the capital, I immediately made big purchases that left me with low liquidity. I received investments that allowed me to keep growing my business by acquiring a production base east of Lebrick Viscounty. It was in the countryside, and we immediately hired the locals to cultivate and manufacture the ingredients we needed for our cosmetics and toiletries.

The production base was still a work in progress and we'd save a lot of money on production costs when it became operational. All this would allow us to create a new line of products targeted at commoners.

I sighed contentedly before asking, "Misha, could you tell me what I have planned next?"

Since I caught her off guard while she was blowing on her coffee to cool it down, she hurriedly opened her notebook. “Y-You have a meeting with the chair of the Bren Commercial Firm, followed by an inspection of the shop, and then dinner with Viscount Naba tonight.”

“The chair of the Bren Commercial Firm? I suppose he must be at his wit’s end if he’s requesting a meeting,” commented Lunoa.

Even though both girls were the same age, Lunoa drank her coffee black and appreciated the deep flavor. Misha, on the other hand, had added plenty of milk and sugar.

“I would assume so too,” I replied. “Bren mainly sells lipstick but is not that big of a company. Competing with us must have put quite the strain on them.”

“Then, will you deal with them the usual way?” she asked.

“Yes. If they’re willing to swear allegiance to me, I’ll happily welcome Bren as our newest subsidiary.”

We had our fair share of feuds when we began operating in the capital. Most firms had either waved the white flag and became one of our subsidiaries or tried to compete with us by increasing the quality of their products. The shady ones, however, had resorted to dirtier tactics such as obstructing business, filling out fake claims, or even hiring hitmen to assassinate me.

I hadn’t taken kindly to such behavior and crushed these unlawful companies with no remorse. Still, I’d hired employees who weren’t involved in their company’s dirty antics and used their trade channels well. Traitre had grown far more, making it easier to absorb the legitimate companies that had tried to compete with us, fair and square. Rather than submit, some had given up on the capital entirely and had moved their firm elsewhere in a last-ditch effort to remain afloat.

The Bren Commercial Firm had put up a good fight, but I was sure their boss wanted to see me to concede at last.

“Lunoa, you’ll accompany me to my work dinner tonight. As for you, Mireille, find a suitable gift for Viscount Naba.”

“Understood,” said Lunoa.

“I’ll have it ready for you, miss,” responded Mireille.

Noblemen had recently approached me to ask me to open branches in their territories. They usually offered me preferential treatment and tax cuts. Although their offers were tempting, I already had my hands full with the capital. I was more than open to

branching out in the future, so I maintained good relationships with them.

"Miss Ellie... Are you sure you want me there tonight?" asked Lunoa.

"Absolutely. You will become one of Traitre's top executives, so you need to learn how to handle nobles."

I downed the rest of my cup in one gulp.

"All right, we've had enough of a break. Let us get back to work."

◇

Our hard work was paying off based on how Traitre's position in the capital became increasingly stable. However, sudden news disrupted our routine.

"Miss Ellie!" exclaimed Arnaud, rushing into my office.

Misha outright jumped with her hair standing on end as she and Lunoa looked surprised.

"What happened?" I asked.

Arnaud usually didn't overreact, meaning something serious must have happened.

"I just received an emergency report," he started. "The Kingdom of Sarjas declared war on the empire! Their army is marching on Lebrick Viscounty as we speak!"

"The Kingdom of Sarjas did what?!" I repeated, confused.

The Kingdom of Sarjas was one of Haldoria's vassal nations. While they called themselves a "kingdom," they had so little land—four cities, including the royal capital, and a dozen villages—that their entire territory was barely as large as one of the Yutear Empire's counties. Their land was also mountainous and rugged, making it unsuitable for agriculture and natural resources, including scarce mineral deposits.

Sarjas depended heavily on their industry and the income from tourism to survive. The beautiful landscape attracted tourists en masse and many aristocrats of the Kingdom of Haldoria had villas next to their scenic lake.

Though the king of Sarjas could keep his people fed thanks to those revenue sources, he'd never had sufficient funds to develop his military. A small country with an underdeveloped military taking up arms against a giant like the Yutear Empire was suicide.

I would have usually laughed at their terrible decision-making and moved on, but their timing couldn't have been worse.

"Misha, get me a map," I ordered.

"At once, miss." She retrieved a map from the shelf and spread it over my desk.

"This is bad," I whispered.

The Kingdom of Sarjas was on the eastern border of the wasteland that separated the Kingdom of Haldoria from the empire. Dense forests and mountain ranges formed a natural barrier between the two nations, and they'd have no choice but to go through Broccen Valley to attack.

Once they passed Broccen Valley, they'd end up near the production base we'd only just secured. Even if they didn't raid the village there, considering the topology of the land and the position of the roads and waterways, it was the most logical trajectory for their army to take. I doubted they'd leave the place unscathed.

"There's a fortress in Broccen Valley, right, Arnaud?" I asked.

"Yes, miss, Broccen Fortress," said Arnaud.

"How many men?"

"That's classified information. When considering the intelligence I gathered from local villages and the size of the supply chain, I estimate there should be around five to six hundred men."

"Mireille, how large is Sarjas's army?"

"Well, the estimate is most likely a thousand two hundred to a thousand five hundred men at best."

"If the empire's men focus on defense, they should hold the fortress for several days."

With over three times as many soldiers of the Yutear Empire on the other side, defending the fortress for a long time would prove difficult. Because Broccen Fortress held a positional advantage, it shouldn't fall too easily.

"How did Lord Lucas react?"

"I'm afraid I do not know yet..."

Knocks on the window interrupted Arnaud, where I saw a small bird with vivid green wings. I gestured at Misha to open the window, which she did quickly. The bird flew into the room before stopping on Mireille's arm.

"This is from Stia," said Mireille, taking out the small piece of paper attached to the bird's leg.

I'd left Stia in the viscounty so she could help Grantz manage

Traitre's affairs there. She must have sent more news.

"This is about the war. Apparently, Lord Lucas gathered his troops as soon as he heard about the invasion. He'll ride to intercept Sarjas's army with a force of around a thousand eight hundred men and has sent a hundred fifty men, including fifty cavalrymen ahead."

"A thousand eight hundred men, huh? That should be good enough," I said.

Lucas would establish a defensive battle with men far better trained and even had a numerical advantage. The soldiers stationed in Broccen Fortress and Lucas's advance force would buy him enough time to get there. Once he arrived, the Sarjan would face doom—end of the story.

"What would you like to do, miss?"

"For now, nothing," I answered after a short pause. "Lord Lucas should get rid of the Sarjan army shortly. But let's monitor the situation just in case. Come to me if you hear anything new, Arnaud."

"Understood."

Despite the low likelihood of Sarjas's army getting past Broccen Fortress, let alone defeat Lucas's troops, I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

◆

"Sieg, tell me, has Elizabeth been found yet?"

The prime minister sighed and said, "Your Majesty, this is the third time today. The answer hasn't changed."

The two men were taking a short break in between audiences.

Bulat groaned, displeased.

"I've had people search every corner of the Leiston Duchy— No, of the country. And I've also investigated everyone she used to have contact with, aristocrats and merchants alike. Elizabeth is nowhere to be found," stated Sieg.

"Still, are you sure that branding her a traitor was for the best?"

"I couldn't help it. Prince Friede's image would have suffered if we'd left things alone. Instead of being the monster who jailed his fiancée, His Highness is now the hero who got rid of a criminal."

"I'm not sure anyone truly believes that."

"That doesn't matter. We must keep up appearances. The

commotion will eventually blow over, and our truth will prevail," explained the prime minister. "Besides, a wanted notice makes looking for Elizabeth easier. How else could we have searched the mansions of the people she was on good terms with? We may find eyewitnesses, and a veteran adventurer might even capture her for us with the bounty offered. I've specified that we want her alive so they won't kill her."

"You're ruthless. It is your daughter we're talking about."

"I'm doing all this *because* she's my daughter, which means I've taught her better than this. She should know that serving the nation is her duty as a noblewoman. I can't believe she abandoned her responsibilities to run away. It's rather lamentable."

"Don't you think some foreign spy could have abducted her?"

"No, I felt her mana on the Ice Doll left in her cell. Besides, her favorite maid disappeared alongside her. It was all intentional."

"I suppose so..." The king remained silent for a bit. "What will you do when you find her? Friede already got engaged to Lady Sylvia, and Elizabeth was publicly branded a traitor. Not even I can reinstate her position as a crown princess."

"That, I'm aware of. Officially, we'll sentence Elizabeth to die, create a fake identity for her, and have His Highness take her as his concubine. Then, we will need to say she got sick so she doesn't have to show her face in society much. Once she gives birth, let's pretend that her child is Lady Sylvia's to preserve their succession rights. By the next generation, everything should have settled."

"Will Baron Lockit accept to play along?"

"Granting him better peerage will shut him up. That man wants power but lacks the determination to take over the kingdom."

"I see..."

The opening of the throne room's doors cut off their conversation.

Although the king initially thought the next audience was about to start, he quickly realized that something was odd. There should have been an announcement before the doors opened.

He waited to see who would enter when a messenger barged in. The man gasped for breath as he ran up the ornate carpet before dropping to his knees in front of the king.

"Excuse my insolence, but I have an urgent message for Your Majesty and the prime minister."

"Speak," Bulat said.

“We’ve just received word from our men on the border that the Kingdom of Sarjas was marching on the empire!”

“Wh-What?!”

“Why in the world would they do that?!” yelled Sieg.

“According to their declaration of war, they intend to reclaim the land the empire stole from them,” the messenger answered.

“The land the empire stole?” repeated Bulat, puzzled.

“Twenty years ago, the empire annexed part of Sarjas’s territory,” related Sieg. “Despite that, they did not wage a war for it. Faced with a large monster invasion, Sarjas abandoned this rural area. The Yutear Empire protected the citizens left to fend for themselves before integrating the territory.”

“How ridiculous. They’re asking for the land the empire saved to be returned now, after twenty years?!” exclaimed the king.

“Indeed, it’s quite shameless of them,” agreed Sieg. “I must say I’m surprised, as the king of Sarjas is a reasonable man. Why would he do that?”

Bulat and Sieg deliberated on this momentarily, but neither could figure out the king’s motivations.

◆

On the eastern frontier of the Kingdom of Haldoria, close to the wasteland that served as a buffer zone between the kingdom and the empire, was a troupe of men in full sets of armor.

“Should we not start the drills, Your Highness?” inquired Robert Arty.

While the army was separate from the royal knights, Robert, one of Friede’s closest confidants and a member of his private guard, had been appointed as commander of this unit for the duration of the exceptional military exercise Friede had organized.

The crown prince had ridden alongside the troops, excitedly leading them to the border. Since they’d arrived three days ago, he’d done nothing but prolong the rest period before the drills were to start.

“Not yet. The men are tired from the long march,” said Friede. “We don’t want them to get injured because they can’t focus on training now, do we?”

“I suppose not…”

Robert found Friede’s orders strange, but he could see his point

and did not argue. Soldiers getting hurt during a mere training exercise would bring shame to the army.

And so, Robert assumed their prince was thinking of his men's prestige and well-being, leaving it at that.

"Your Highness!" someone exclaimed, poking their head inside of the prince's tent.

"What is it?" asked Friede.

"I have an urgent report! The Kingdom of Sarjas is marching on the Empire!"

"What?!" Robert all but shouted, flabbergasted.

Robert turned to the prince, only to find him oddly composed. Friede had brought his hand to his chin and appeared to be calmly assessing the situation.

"Y-Your Highness?" added Robert, hesitating.

"The Kingdom of Sarjas is one of our vassals, and we cannot ignore our precious friends in times of danger. Luckily, we're close to the border between the Yutear Empire and Sarjas. We'll join the Sarjan, and assist them," stated Friede.

"A-Are you sure?"

"Naturally, Robert. You're the commander, so make sure you bring honor to your nation!"

"Yes, my prince!"

Robert had yet to digest the sudden news, yet Friede kept his cool and took a levelheaded decision. Still, Robert was prouder than ever of serving such a competent master.

This skirmish was his first campaign, and he trembled with excitement and nerves.

◇

I'd decided to keep an eye on the border conflict. The very next day, as I finished eating lunch and was getting ready to work, Arnaud entered my office with a long face.

"News about the border?" I asked.

"Yes, miss... I just received word that...Broccen Fortress had fallen..." he faltered.

Lunoa and Misha gasped as Mireille closed her eyes slowly, without a sound. I took a deep breath to compose myself.

I'd had a bad feeling about this from the very start. After all, it made no sense for Sarjas to embark on such a pointless endeavor.

"Do you know how that happened?" I asked.

"I don't have the details yet... All I know is that an extraordinary unit appeared on the battlefield and came to Sarjas's aid."

"An extraordinary unit? They're not part of Sarjas's army, then?"

"No, their equipment was apparently quite different."

"It must be an adventurer party... No, a mercenary corps sounds more likely."

"That's also what I thought, but their description does not match that of any famous mercenary group."

"So they either came from afar or are a newly formed troop," I concluded.

I rested my chin on my hand and pondered over the situation.

"What was Sarjas's next move?" I mused. "And what about Lord Lucas's troops?"

"The Sarjan took over the fortress and built a bridgehead. Viscount Lucas's situation is a little unclear at the moment," said Arnaud. "His advance force was rooted. Considering his main troop's distance and marching speed, I believe he has yet to engage with the Sarjan."

Moreover, the Sarjan army would need a few days to strengthen their position. The army would then either set up a defense line and hold the area, declaring it part of their territory, or they would advance deeper into Lucas's territory.

Either way, they'd end up spoiling my plans.

"I've made up my mind," I declared after a brief pause.

"Miss Ellie?"

"We're joining the fray. Mireille, go get food and potion stocks ready."

"Are you serious, miss?!" exclaimed Mireille.

"I am. We'll hire adventurers and mercenaries, who I'll lead personally. The robust Broccen Fortress fell in a single day. Even with more men, Lord Lucas won't prevail. The entire region will fall into turmoil, not leaving Traitre unscathed."

I took out a piece of paper, scribbled a message, and sealed it. Later, I did the same thing and handed both letters along with a letter of introduction I'd gotten from Lucas over to Lunoa.

"Lunoa, take those to the guild masters of the Adventurers' Guild and Mercenaries' Guild at once. If you show them this letter of introduction, they should allow you to see the guild masters in person."

"G-Got it!" said Lunoa.

"Misha, you accompany her."

"Yes, miss!"

After sending Lunoa and Misha, I hurried to my room to change into formal wear to visit the imperial palace. If I could get the emperor's approval to form a volunteer army, it would make things proceed much smoother.

"Miss Ellie, are you really sure about that?" asked Mireille.

"I have made my decision."

"If you fight, the kingdom will figure out where you are..."

"I know. Though I hoped to reinforce my influence before I revealed myself, I have no choice. The people of that village are my people now, Mireille. If I abandon them now, Traitre will suffer in the long run. Besides, there's something fishy about this war. The king of Sarjas isn't one to do things like that."

"Do you mean to say someone is pulling the strings in the shadows?"

"I'll head to the battlefield and see for myself."

◆

Sergio clicked his tongue as he quickly read the reports his subordinates had brought him. Most of them were about the war

that had just broken out.

A tiny country that barely had any soldiers had suddenly invaded and somehow taken Broccen Fortress in a day.

“Some things just don’t add up...” he said, unconsciously putting his fingers on the large scar on his cheek. He had picked up this habit when he was still an active adventurer and had never managed to let it go.

Nonetheless, he stared at one of the papers with his eyebrows knitted until someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” he said.

“My apologies, Guild Master, but someone is here to see you,” said Sarasa, the young and popular foxkin receptionist of the guild.

“I’m not waiting for anyone, though,” replied Sergio, perplexed.

“I’m aware, but someone from the Traitre Commercial Firm is desperate to see you. She came bearing this letter of introduction so...” elaborated Sarasa, handing him a letter.

“Tsk... Can’t say no if a nobleman’s involved,” said Sergio, looking at the seal.

The crest on the seal included wings, and only noble families in the empire were allowed to add wings to their family crest.

“Hey, Iris! Whose crest is that?” asked Sergio, shoving the crest in front of his vice-master’s face without a care in the world.

“Open it, and you’ll find you,” said the woman with a sigh, not taking her eyes off her work. After a pause, she shifted her focus to the crest despite her complaints. “Seriously, you should know these things.”

Despite her rough tone, typical of a former adventurer, Iris excelled at intelligence gathering and office work. As a result, Sergio developed the terrible habit of dumping most of the work on her lap.

“That’s...House Lebrick’s crest,” she said.

“Isn’t that Lebrick guy the one fighting the invaders from...erm, you know...that small country...”

“The Kingdom of Sarjas, yes. Come to think of it, Traitre Commercial Firm used to have its headquarters in Lebrick Viscounty if memory serves me right. I’m guessing their request has to do with the war.”

“Since when do you know so much about firms too?” asked Sergio.

“You tend to forget that I’m still a woman, right? I have an

interest in cosmetics."

Sergio burst out laughing. "That was a good joke, Iri—OUCH!!!"

The guild master clutched his stomach, struggling to endure the pain. Iris ignored him and turned to Sarasa.

"Show Traitre's messenger in. We'll hear them out."

"My pleasure, Miss Iris," responded Sarasa, bowing politely before leaving the room.

"Sarasa... *I'm* the guild master...not her..."

No one answered Sergio's pitiful whine.

After sending the young girl who'd come bearing Traitre's request home, Sergio and Iris sat facing one another.

"What are your thoughts, Iris?" inquired Sergio.

"Well, the conditions sound good to me," said Iris, reading through the letter Traitre's messenger had given them. "Traitre's chair wants us to send adventurers for her to lead into battle against Sarjas. She specified she wanted veteran adventurers only. But since she's offering double the market price, we'll easily find candidates."

"That's not my point. I'm more concerned about the motivations of Traitre's chair. Why is a mere merchant trying to get involved in the war? The only reason I can think of is that she wants to snatch an honorary title, and that's a pretty risky move. Isn't her business booming too? She'd better stay put and enjoy her money. D'ya think she's a patriot?"

"She's not even from the empire, so I doubt it," answered Iris. "That said, she started Traitre in Lebrick Viscounty, and this is only hearsay, but rumor has it that Traitre invested quite a bit of money in facilities near the war zone."

"So she wants to protect these facilities, huh?"

"Most likely. Her reasons don't really matter, do they? She'll get rid of the invaders for us, *and* we'll rake in a ton of money. As far as I'm concerned, that sounds great."

"Fair point. Since that woman limited her offer to veterans, I'm guessing she's planning to put together a small elite force."

"It makes sense. If Broccen Fortress fell in a day, they must have strong fighters on the other side. An army of weaklings won't help her."

"Yeah, I agree. All right, let's get the veterans who're currently in the capital in the loop."

◆

Marty, the newest recruit of the Rank A adventurer party Sharp Edge, was on her way back to the party's lodging. While she was still only an apprentice, she'd completed the mission that Elsa, the party leader, had given her.

"I'm back," she said as she entered the house.

She was surprised to find Sarasa, the receptionist of the Adventurers' Guild, in the vestibule.

"Oh, welcome back, Marty," Elsa greeted her.

"Thank you, Miss Elsa. Hello, Miss Sarasa."

"Hi, Marty," said Sarasa, patting the younger girl's head.

"Miss Sarasa! I'm not a kid anymore! I'm sixteen!"

"So big already? My bad, my bad," remarked Sarasa, jokingly.

Marty had joined the guild at ten, and Sarasa immediately became attached to the fellow foxkin, treating her like a younger sister.

"I can't believe you," complained Marty, pouting as Sarasa continued to pet her.

Despite Sarasa's apology, her hand hadn't stopped and continued to scratch Marty tenderly between the ears. While Marty complained, she actually enjoyed the attention and did nothing to push the older girl away. Eventually, Sarasa stopped and turned to Elsa.

"I'll leave you to your thoughts, Miss Elsa," said Sarasa.

"All right. I'll discuss it with my comrades and get back to you."

"This matter is quite urgent so I'd appreciate it if you could come up with an answer by the end of the day."

"Will do."

Sarasa had only been gone a few seconds when Marty inquired, "Miss Elsa, what was that all about?"

"Sarasa came to offer us a job."

"But you always handpick requests, so why did you want to discuss it with us?"

"This one is a bit particular. They've asked us to join the border conflict. Fighting an army is nothing like fighting monsters or brigands, Marty."

"We'd be joining the war..."

Although Marty was an apprentice in Sharp Edge, she was still a Rank C adventurer in her own right and lauded as a promising

young talent. She'd killed people before during missions—brigands mainly—but she had never taken part in a large-scale conflict like this one.

"Don't panic, Marty," said Elsa, gently smiling. "Come on, let's go and ask the others what they think."

The promised reward seemed attractive, and the client would handle all their expenses, including food. She would also offer bonuses to those who contributed to the mission's success. But those ideal conditions weren't why the members of Sharp Edge ultimately accepted the offer. Lisa, their healer, came from a village located near the war zone. If the flames of war continued to spread, her hometown would be at risk. As soon as they learned that, her teammates immediately decided to fight.

Elsa, Marty, and the others departed from the Southern Gate two days later and proceeded to an open grassland.

Sharp Edge comprised five women. Elsa, the swordswoman and leader of the party; Sarina, the shield knight; Sicily, who doubled as a warrior and archer; Lisa, the healer; and Marty, the scout. Though Elsa and Sarina were Rank A adventurers, Sicily and Lisa were Rank B. As for Marty, their newest recruit, she was a promising Rank C.

All in all, the members of Sharp Edge were skilled, veteran adventurers. But Elsa was in a league of her own and had even earned herself a nickname.

Even among the elite parties recruited for this mission, Sharp Edge was one of the best and had been picked by their client, Traitre's chair, to remain by her side at all times.

After they reached the meeting place, Elsa left them to attend a briefing with the other party leaders. The rest of the party inspected their weapons and equipment when a man's voice came from behind, "Hey!"

"Mr. Bren!" Marty exclaimed.

Bren was a member of the Rank A party, Scorching Fists. Marty had worked with him several times before joining her current party. In fact, he had introduced her to the other members of Sharp Edge.

"Glad to see you guys took the job too," he said.

"The reward was good but, beyond that, we couldn't stay away once we heard that Lisa's hometown was next to the war zone," related Sicily.

"Is that so? You must be so worried, Lisa."

“Guys, aren’t you a little worried about her?” asked Marty, looking at their client, Ellie, issuing orders to the party leaders and mercenary corps leaders she’d hired.

“That girl with black hair next to her looks like she can fight, but our client just looks like some frail noble lady.”

Sicily immediately hit the top of Marty’s head with her dainty hand. She looked nothing like an adventurer either.

“Marty, you’re supposed to be a scout. Isn’t it high time you learned to observe people properly?” scolded Sicily.

“Huh?”

“Come on, take another look at that Ellie girl. She looks frail; I’ll give you that. But can’t you see there are no gaps in her stance? She’s doing a good job of concealing her abilities, so she must be pretty damn strong,” indicated Bren.

“No way!”

Marty focused on Ellie, and as Bren had said, her stance appeared natural and lacked any weak spots.

“Her magic must be quite something too,” added Lisa.

The ever-silent Sarina nodded.

“Why would you say that?” Marty asked. “I couldn’t feel her mana at all when she greeted us earlier.”

Sarina elaborated, “Lisa’s saying that *because* we couldn’t sense any mana. Even people like Elsa or me who can’t use magic have some mana. We all use our mana unconsciously to reinforce our bodies or our senses occasionally. That’s especially true of people who train and develop skills. Since we already established she was a strong fighter thanks to her stance, she should have some mana. How come we didn’t feel any, then?”

“Ah!” exclaimed Marty as the answer dawned on her.

“Did you finally get it? She’s concealing her mana on purpose. Erasing every last trace of it is far from being easy. Her control is as great as the imperial magician! With that level, it wouldn’t surprise me if she had a Divine Artifact,” stated Lisa.

“Exactly. She’s much stronger than us, Marty. Elsa’s probably the only one with a shot against her,” concluded Sicily.

“I’m so glad we’re on the same side,” whispered Marty.

◇

The adventurers and mercenaries I’d recruited had all gathered

at a field just outside the capital.

"That's more people than I hoped for," I commented.

"Seventy-four in total," Mireille informed me.

"We sure got lucky. Could you gather the leaders for me?"

"At once, miss."

Mireille brought me the leaders of the mercenary corps and adventurer parties. There were five of them: Elsa, the Rank A leader of Sharp Edge; Thomas, a Rank A adventurer and leader of Scorching Fists; Rick, the Rank B leader of Fanged Dragon Scales; Julius, the commander of the Swift Drake Mercenary Corps; and Gandor, the commander of the Gandor Mercenary Corps. They'd be the core of our newly formed group.

"Thank you for heeding my request and joining me here today," I started. "I'm Ellie Leis, chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm."

I'd already introduced myself to them separately, and it was proper to do it again now that our mission was about to start.

"As you already know, your mission is to follow my command so we may push back the Sarjan forces out of Lebrick Viscounty. Are you all ready to do that?"

The five leaders nodded.

"We'll join the war as a volunteer army sanctioned by the emperor," I continued, showing them the official order I'd received, appointing me as the leader of the volunteer army, and approving the operation. "As promised, I'll provide food and water during our campaign. For now, I'll distribute two days' worth of emergency rations. We'll ride ahead, but I have a supply chain set up. Any questions?"

"Do you mind?" asked Elsa, the leader of Sharp Edge, raising her hand.

Elsa was a tall beauty with long red hair that she kept tied into a ponytail. She was the only adventurer present who had earned a nickname and was undoubtedly the most skilled warrior. Considering her skills and the fact that her party encompassed women only, I'd decided that Mireille and I would join them during this operation.

"Elsa, right? Please go ahead."

"I know we can't bring too much luggage since we'll have to be quick on our feet. Still, isn't this too little for two days?"

"It'll be fine. The rations I handed out and the ones arriving through the supply line are only to be used in an emergency."

“An emergency?” repeated Elsa, puzzled.

“Yes. I’m carrying the main supplies.”

“What do you mean?”

I gathered some mana into my left hand and chanted, “Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Mammon.”

The leaders gasped.

“Is that…a Divine Artifact?”

“I sure didn’t see that coming! You look strong, but I didn’t think you’d have a Divine Artifact!”

“My Divine Artifact allows me to store things away in a dedicated subspace,” I explained. “I have enough food and water to feed a hundred people for several months. What I gave you is insurance should we get separated unexpectedly.”

“That’s one handy power you’ve got there, miss!”

“I shared this with you because the situation required it, though I’d appreciate it if you could keep it a secret.”

I wouldn’t be able to hide my true Divine Artifact much longer. If someone investigated, they’d discover anything I said didn’t add up and that I had several grimoires. As such, the best I could do was to keep them quiet.

“Any more questions?” I asked.

I answered a few more questions before we finally departed.

We were a group of over fifty armed men and women, so—naturally—authorities stopped us at every checkpoint. Whenever that happened, I just had to show the documents I’d received from the palace, showing that the emperor had approved of our volunteer army being allowed passage.

After a few days on horseback, we reached Lebrick Viscounty.

As we got closer to the area that was under Sarjas’s control, we encountered more and more people on the roads, fleeing the conflict. We stopped some of them to ask for information. From there on, we risked running into foes at any time.

We picked out an appropriate location based on the land’s topology and established a camp. The spot we’d selected was very close to the birthplace of one of the members of Sharp Edge.

I summoned the key members of our operation to the large tent I occupied in the camp.

“This tent will be our headquarters for the time being,” I stated. “First of all, we must survey our surroundings and contact the viscount’s army. He should be south of here, beyond the forest.”

“We’ll have our scouts survey the area.”

“Ours will go too.”

“And we’ll take care of the communication with Viscount Lucas. Our drakes can run through the forest faster than horses can.”

Once each leader answered, I nodded before giving out some more orders. I wanted the scouts to form small groups and survey the forest, including the nearby villages. Then, I handed a letter I’d written for Lucas to the leader of the Swift Drake Mercenary Corps and asked him to have his fastest rider deliver it.

“Stone Wall,” I chanted.

One-meter-tall walls appeared all around the camp, which I kept low so we could preserve our visibility.

The adventurers and mercenaries with proficiency in earth magic dug trenches to strengthen the camp’s defense. We could then slow down unforeseen offensives by our enemies or monsters.

“Miss Ellie, some of the scouts are back,” said Mireille.

“Let’s go hear their report,” I said, heading to our headquarters.

Two groups had returned: the one who had inspected the forest in the south and the other who’d surveyed the mountains up north.

“Please report,” I ordered.

“Nothing unusual up there. You might encounter slightly more monsters than before, but that’s about it.”

“That’s because of the army coming in from the east,” I remarked. “Monsters with a bit of intellect like goblins fled this way to avoid it.”

“I also noticed more monsters than usual in the forest. And I have something else to report. I saw a scout from afar. Most likely a Sarjan,” another scout chimed in.

“So they already reached the forest…”

“It didn’t look like they were about to advance. They just seemed to keep an eye on the edges of the forest.”

While I listened to the reports, the scouts in charge of the east barged into the tent.

“B-Bad news!” yelped the foxkin girl from Elsa’s party. “A group of armed men took over the village in the east!”

“They’re occupying it?” I mused.

It was surprising because, from the information I had received, that place was a small farm village. Raiding villages to seize their provisions during a war was quite common, but occupying them since they posed no tactical importance made little sense. I couldn’t

figure out why they'd do that.

"Give us more details," I emphasized.

"We observed the village from a nearby hill. Armed men lingered around, and there were barely any villagers," she said.

The scout of Scorching Fists who'd accompanied her nodded in agreement.

"At some point, a woman ran out of her house only for those brutes to drag her back. We also saw red stains on the ground. The men were trying to wash them away with water, but it looked like blood."

"In other words, they attacked the village, killed those who resisted, and captured the women."

"Yes."

Voices erupted around me.

The international laws of war strictly prohibited harming civilians and doing that meant risking incurring the wrath of neutral countries. Besides, the civilians of this area would never forgive Sarjas for that. If their goal was to take back their land, this was a very foolish move.

In most cases, armies that requisitioned food almost always offered some payment—albeit under the market price—to avoid hurting their image too much.

"A single unit might have acted out," I said.

"That's the most plausible option."

"How many men would you say there were?"

"Around ten, I think."

I brought my hand to my chin, knowing that I had to decide. Were we to save the villagers or not?

"Let's save the village," I declared. "If we can capture a few enemy soldiers while we're at it, we might get our hands on some decent information too."

"Sounds good! Let's have at 'em!" proclaimed Thomas, the leader of Scorching Fists, as he cracked his fingers.

I tapped his shoulder lightly to calm him down and said, "You'll remain here. The camp's defenses aren't fully in place, and we can't afford to leave it vulnerable."

"Who's going, then?"

I looked around, making up my mind, and continuing, "I'll head there personally with Elsa's party. Mireille, you're in charge of supervising the camp. And Thomas, you lead the defensive forces if

anything happens."

"Hang on! Why can't Elsa and her gals stay here while *we* go with you?" said Thomas, groaning.

"Women are being held captive, remember? A party of women is far better suited to this mission than a group of rugged men."

"Fair enough..."

"You'll have plenty of occasions to go wild, so please keep our base safe for now."

"All right, all right. I'll yield...but only this time."

"Thank you, Thomas," I said. "Elsa, we're leaving in ten minutes."

"Got it. We'll get ready."

◇

We observed the village from a small hill and spotted several armed men, just as Marty had reported, acting as though they owned the place.

"Here are the Sarjan," she said.

"They don't look like regular soldiers to me," I responded.

The foxkin scout nodded.

"Can you point to the house in which the women are being held captive?"

"This one," said Marty, pointing to a house in front of the village's entrance. "Next to the big one."

The bigger building was most likely the mayor's house. In rural villages, the mayor's house often doubled as an inn and a meeting place to hold assemblies since it was usually twice as big as regular houses.

"You saw ten men, right, Marty?" I checked once more.

"Yes. We observed the village for around thirty minutes, and I noticed ten of them."

I took a closer look at the men.

"Their equipment is fairly good, but they move like amateurs," I noted. "Farmers who were recruited on the spot, perhaps?"

"Yeah, they don't look like fighters," agreed Elsa. "They're fairly muscular, so they must have had a pretty physical job."

Elsa's words confirmed my theory.

"It doesn't seem like there'd be more than one squadron, meaning we're looking at twelve men at most," I said.

“Sounds about right. I expect their commanding officer will be a regular in the army, not some recruit.”

“Well, I doubt he’s any good if he’s leading a band of outlaws.”

“True.”

Elsa and I exchanged a look and chuckled.

Most of the other people in my life were quite quirky. But Elsa was a refreshingly simple and frank woman, and I very much enjoyed conversing with her.

“So, what’s the plan?” she asked. “I don’t think we’d struggle much even if we were to take them head-on, but...”

Elsa’s estimation of the gap between them and us seemed about right, and direct combat was indeed the easiest way to go about this. However, we couldn’t choose this approach, which Elsa was also aware of.

“No, we can’t do that. If the soldiers take the villagers hostage, the situation will become far more complicated. Besides, we’re not even sure of their exact numbers,” I said.

“Yeah, I figured. I guess we’ll have to try a more subtle approach.”

“We’ll split into two groups after entering the village and crush whoever we encounter quietly.”

“All right. In that case, Marty, you’re with me. Sicily, you accompany Miss Ellie,” Elsa instructed immediately. “Lisa, you’re on standby for now. Keep her safe, Sarina.”

As she was the only healer, we’d need Lisa to treat the villagers after the battle. Meanwhile, Sarina wore a thick set of metallic armor and carried a large shield. Covert missions didn’t suit her, so having her wait outside the village was for the best.

Elsa and the others quickly checked their weapons and equipment.

I was carrying my usual sword with a dagger tucked into a leather holster on the opposite side. Then, I checked that the throwing knives I’d brought were still in my pockets before following Elsa and the others down the hill.

We hid in the high bushes next to the village and held our breath, waiting for an opportunity to strike. After a few moments, an armed man sat on a rock beside the bushes and lit a cigarette.

Cigarettes were a luxury, and it surprised me to see someone smoke in the countryside where they were hard to come by. I assumed the army had provided some to the soldiers to calm their

nerves. At least, this confirmed one thing: while he appeared to be a fresh recruit, this man was definitely part of the army.

I gestured to Elsa that I'd take care of him, then took the opportunity of a large cloud obstructing the moon to lunge at him. I covered his mouth with my hand and dragged him into the bushes.

The man tried to resist but Elsa and Sicily swiftly pinned his arms down while I pressed my dagger to his throat.

"I'll remove my hand if you cooperate. Scream and I'll slice your throat," I warned. "Blink once if you got it." My tone carried the seriousness of my threat and the man blinked slowly, tears welling up in his eyes.

We'd lucked out. Thankfully, the soldier gave us a better idea of the enemy's numbers and positions. I ran my blade against the man's neck lightly, and he squealed as a drop of blood ran down his neck.

"Very well. First of all, I'd love to know who you guys are. You're not regular soldiers, are you? Recruits of Sarjas's army, perhaps?"

"W-We're from the K-K-Kingdom of Haldoria," he stammered.

"Carry on."

Had Bulat sent reinforcements to Sarjas? I couldn't imagine him sending troops to assist the Sarjan in such a ridiculous war when they didn't even have the moral high ground. Bulat was far from being smart, but he wasn't that foolish.

The Sarjan's justification was as ridiculous as the ones that thugs used to claim turf.

"Th-The prince came to our village...and he said they'd pay us handsomely if we enlisted..."

"The prince?"

"Y-Y-Yes... When the war broke out... His Highness was near the border with his troops carrying out a military exercise and recruited us."

"Is that right...?"

Friede participating in a military exercise?!

He'd never done anything like that before. As Bulat's son, he had plenty of talent but loathed effort and was barely at the level of a regular knight. While he did have a Divine Artifact, that wouldn't take him far against an experienced fighter.

I couldn't picture him taking part in the drills or leading an army. His being near the border at that moment was far too

convenient, making me believe this wasn't a coincidence.

"I finally get it... I kept thinking something was off, but it was all that idiot's doing," I said.

Although the Kingdom of Sarjas was a famed touristic destination, it was far from self-sufficient concerning food. It relied on Haldoria's support, especially for salt, and sending out that aid happened to be Friede's job.

I used to do all the work; he'd only ever signed the documents. With me gone, the burden would have fallen on his shoulders.

If he'd threatened to stop all support, the Sarjans would have had no choice but to listen to him. They could have tried to complain to the king, yet the crown prince was to handle all communications with vassal countries. He would never have allowed any letter to reach his dense father.

Friede was a simple man. Without me to cover for his shortcomings, his reputation had plummeted. He'd figured that winning a war would undo the damage.

He could have just hunted monsters...

I was growing more and more irritated but continued to question the soldier.

"What did you do to the villagers?"

"We... Erm..."

I pressed my dagger to the man's neck and drew blood.

"W-Wait! I'll speak! I'll speak!"

"Hurry up."

"The men resisted so...we didn't really have a choice and..." he trailed off.

"You killed them," I finished for him. "What about the women and children?"

"Well... We trapped them inside, and you know..."

"Enough," I snapped.

I would let him know exactly what he'd done.

"What you did to these people violates the international laws of war. You're criminals now. After a few battles, diplomats usually end up resolving such conflicts. Now that civilians have been armed, peace talks are off the table for good. The empire will have to retaliate to avenge its people to maintain prestige. What you've done will lead to the death of thousands of people. Some will be perfect strangers, but others might be your friends and families."

"N-No way... We only followed the prince's orders..."

“Huh?” exclaimed Elsa and the others in unison.

I was just as shocked and let out a gasp.

Adventurers above Rank D sometimes fought in wars and were thus required to learn the basics of international law. As such, Elsa and her party all realized the outrageousness in the soldier’s statement.

Avoiding harm to civilians was common sense in times of war.

The fact that these men hadn’t acted on their own but on the orders of a royal made this even more problematic. I’d expected this conflict to end soon, and it now risked turning into an all-out war that would result in the death of tens of thousands.

“What in the world is the Haldorian prince thinking?!” proclaimed Elsa.

“Is he trying to get rid of Sarjas altogether?!” added Sicily, both outraged and astonished.

Marty remained silent, shaking from the shock.

Seeing their reaction, the man finally understood the gravity of his and his companions’ actions. His face became pale, and he started trembling.

“If you want to minimize the damage, you’d better tell me everything you know,” I said.

I got the number, equipment, and positions of his comrades out of him, as well as information about his officer.

“That’s all we need to know,” I concluded, pulling my dagger away.

“W-Wait…”

“What?”

“Can I come with you?”

“Huh?”

“Let me help you save the village! I want to atone for my wrongdoings!”

“What in the world…is wrong with you?” I retorted, seething.

I couldn’t believe my ears, then swung my blade and slit the throat of that naive murderer. The cut wasn’t deep enough to kill him on the spot, but he wouldn’t be able to stop the bleeding by himself.

“You want to atone?” I asked. “There’s only one way for you to do that. Die a slow, painful death.”

We left the man behind, writhing in agony on the ground, and headed to the village.

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Sicily and I entered from the east of the village while Elsa and Marty dealt with the west. We jumped over the simple barricade they'd erected to deal with wild beasts and sneaked in.

The village appeared silent until we paid close attention, hearing feeble cries.

Just then, Sicily and I gestured to each other quietly. When I gave the signal, we opened the door of a house ever so slightly and slipped in without making a sound. The air inside was thick with the smoke of cigarettes while four men were sitting, casually playing cards.

A woman and a young girl—her daughter, I assumed—stood behind the table, each carrying a bottle of alcohol. They were the first to notice our entrance. Even though the mother opened her eyes wide and remained silent, the girl gasped.

Before the sound could reach the men's ears, Sicily threw her knife, piercing right into the throat of the man standing opposite of us.

"What the—"

It shocked the other three to see a knife suddenly fly into their comrade's neck, but we took care of them before they could scream. Sicily and I plunged our blades into the neck of the man who was sitting with his back facing us and, in one motion, cut off his head. I then dashed to the right, pressed my hand on the soldier's mouth, and slit his throat while Sicily did the same to the man on the left.

Needless to say, we did not grant them short, painless deaths. I kept the man quiet while he bled out and only let go when he went still in my hold. Upon doing that, I looked at Sicily and saw that she'd also held back.

In a way, the man we'd beheaded had been the luckiest. He had died on the spot without even understanding what was going on. The last thing he'd seen before his consciousness faded out forever was probably his own body.

I heard a strange gurgling sound, and my eyes darted in that direction to notice that the man that Sicily had hit with her first knife had stood up. He was staggering, though I couldn't help but be somewhat impressed by his resilience.

As I stepped forward to finish him, someone slammed a bottle into the back of his head before I could do anything.

He fell to the ground as the mother used the shattered bottle she was still holding to stab him again and again. Her daughter grabbed the knife stuck in his throat and did the same, tears streaming down her face as she exerted herself.

Sicily and I remained silent, letting them do what they needed. Long after the man had stopped moaning in pain and gone still, I put a hand on each of their shoulders and said, “He’s dead.”

The mother wept as the girl screamed through the tears, “It was him! Him! *He* killed dad!”

Knowing we had to move on, Sicily and I comforted them as well as we could before asking them to hide in the cellar. We then proceeded to the next house.

The first thing we saw was a naked man panting and thrusting his hips. Bruises covered the entire body of the poor girl who lay under him, and her face had gone red and swollen from crying.

“Come on, cry for me!” shouted the man at the young girl as he raised his fist.

He tried to punch the lifeless young girl in the face, but his fist never reached her cheek. Instead, it hit the floor along with his forearm.

“Huh?” the man let out.

Sicily kicked him off the girl, and he groaned in pain.

“Here, you dropped this,” I said, throwing his severed arm at him.

“What...?” asked the man, unable to process what was happening as he reflexively extended his other arm to catch it.

As soon as he caught it, I sliced off his other arm, and the man stared dumbfounded as his limbs fell.

“Oh my! You had to catch it properly! What are you doing?” I mocked, lowering Flügel.

My magic rapier became known for being so incredibly sharp and precise that one of its previous users had beheaded a monster without it noticing until its head had fallen off several days later.

The man panted as blood splattered out of his stumps. When he opened his mouth to scream at the sight of all this blood, Sicily crushed his throat with a dagger. He convulsed as his blood bubbled in his throat and fell to the ground, soon to die.

We ignored him and checked the girl’s condition instead. Even though she had countless wounds all over her body, none of them were severe enough to threaten her life. I considered healing her

but left that part to Lisa because securing the village was more urgent.

"Only the mayor's house is left," I said. "I'll head there and take care of the commander. Sicily, could you go get Lisa and Sarina?"

After sending Sicily away, I joined Elsa and Marty. They'd taken care of things on their side, so we headed to the mayor's house together.

According to our intel, there should be five people in the building—the commander, two recruits, and the mayor as well as her daughter.

"That should be the last of them," I said.

"We questioned the soldiers on our side before killing them, so I'm fairly certain it is," answered Elsa. "By the way, we grouped the people we saved and told them to hide together."

"Good thinking. How many villagers did you rescue?"

"Eighteen women, nine men, and sixteen children."

"That's a lot. We only found three women," I said.

"We ended up finding the place where they'd locked up most of the survivors. As I said, there were a few men, but all of them were old or wounded. The able-bodied men got killed resisting."

Once I exchanged a few words with Elsa, I leaned against the door of the mayor's house and pricked up my ears.

"I don't think anyone's close to the door," I whispered. I opened it narrowly and sneaked a peek, spotting armed men in the back. They were sitting around a table.

In a corner of the room was an older woman sitting on a chair, who I assumed was the mayor. A woman was at the stove, boiling water.

"Elsa, you and I will take care of the soldiers," I continued. "Marty, protect the mayor and her daughter."

"Okay," responded Marty.

"Understood. Do you want them alive?" asked Elsa.

"If possible, yes. I have plenty of questions for them, especially for the commander. He can't be anyone important, but he'll probably know more than the others as a regular soldier. Don't put yourself in danger to do that, though."

"Got it."

Immediately after Elsa and Marty nodded, I slammed the door open and barged into the house. The gazes flew straight at me, but I didn't let that bother me and lunged at the soldiers.

Fortunately, the mayor's daughter was too far away for them to use as a human shield. Marty had already reached the mayor and gripped her dagger, ready to defend the woman.

As for Elsa and me, we used Quick Motion to close the distance that separated us from the soldiers in one step. We struck simultaneously, making the first two soldiers pass out.

"Wh-What the—" started the commander, reaching out for his sword.

I swung Flügel and sliced through the commander's wrist. His hand and sword hit the ground, then I kicked him in the chest, sending him flying.

"Urgh!" he groaned, slamming into the wall and losing consciousness.

"Wake up," I ordered, pouring ice-cold water on his face with my magic.

We tied the three men up, and the recently arrived Lisa stopped the commander's bleeding.

He shrieked as he opened his eyes.

"Your little friends are all dead, so I suggest behaving," I said.

"L-Let me go!" he exclaimed.

"That'll depend on your attitude. You'd better tell me everything you know if you want to increase your chances of making it out of here alive."

"I'll speak! I'll tell you anything you want to know, so spare my life, please!"

"All right. First question, then. How many Haldorian soldiers are here to help Sarjas?"

"W-Will you really let me live if I tell you?"

I spun my dagger and stabbed it into his thigh.

"AAARGH!!!"

"Enough with the pointless chatter. Just answer my questions or I'll give you more wounds to cry about. I'm feeling generous, so if you have valuable information, I'll let you go," I said, twisting my dagger.

"I-I got it! So, please! The Haldorian forces are—"

And so, I seized everything he knew out of him. Despite hearing most of it from the previous soldier I'd questioned, I had a better picture of the situation.

Still, I had to dig my blade into his flesh a couple more times, to which the man panted and gritted his teeth in pain.

“Miss Ellie, we’re done,” said Elsa.

“Good.”

Elsa and the others had executed my orders, which meant we were ready to go. I grabbed the commander by the collar and dragged him toward the door.

Sicily and Sarina grabbed one soldier each and followed me.

“Wh-Why?! I told you everything I knew! You promised to let me go!” he wailed as the other two screamed.

“No!”

“Stop! Get your hands off me!”

“I’ll keep my word,” I said, “and let you go. However…”

I threw the man out of the warehouse where I’d taken him and his comrades for questioning. Sicily and Sarina followed suit, and the three men groaned in pain and confusion.

“…I’m not sure *they* will.”

A mob of angry villagers surrounded them, holding spades, hoes, kitchen knives, sickles, and stones.

While I was interrogating them, I had Elsa gather those who desired vengeance. Vigilantism wasn’t particularly legal, but as someone who’d sworn to take revenge on my homeland, I wasn’t one to judge.

Elsa and the others weren’t interested in denouncing these people either.

“W-Wait! S-Save me! Please!”

I turned my back to the pleading man and walked up to the members of Sharp Edge so that we could discuss our next move.

We cleaned up the bodies after the villagers finished and returned to our camp. I trusted the mayor would take care of her people.

Once we arrived, I gathered the key members of our expedition in my tent to give out directions.

“I want three people keeping an eye on the village. There’s no need to establish a defense perimeter but they’ll need to shoot some magic in the sky to give us a signal in the event of an attack. They will then have to delay the enemy while protecting the villagers.”

“I’ll send a few of my guys,” said Elsa.

“Thank you. The rest of us will take turns keeping lookout and resting until we hear from the viscount’s army.”

After discussing the lookout rotation and assigning people to patrol the camp’s surroundings, I declared the meeting over.

Two days of waiting passed, during which we'd gotten rid of three Sarjan scout parties, before the Swift Drake Mercenary Corps returned with a man wearing a set of light armor bearing the crest of House Lebrick.

"We're back, Miss Ellie."

"We've successfully contacted the viscount's army. This is Ygul, who was sent by Viscount Lebrick."

The man stepped forward and introduced himself again, "My name is Ygul. First of all, please allow me to thank you for leading these courageous people and coming to our aid in Lord Lucas Lebrick's name."

Ygul bowed elegantly despite wearing armor, his grace demonstrating he was more used to handling documents than weapons. I assumed he was one of the military officials of Lebrick Viscounty.

I led him to my tent and started exchanging information without delay.

As expected, Lucas's army had set up camp on the plains south of here and was moving east while freeing the occupied villages it came across. Seemingly, they'd also uncovered Friede's involvement in the conflict.

"Lord Lucas used the diplomatic channel to lodge a protest with the Kingdom of Haldoria. As the viscount, the primary diplomat responsible for Haldoria cannot leave the border, which I fear may not yield any results. Additionally, we lack concrete evidence. All we have are the testimonies of a few low-ranking soldiers. I also doubt there'll be much time for peace talks. Now that civilians have been harmed, the war won't end so easily."

"I agree and am sure the Kingdom of Haldoria will deny the prince's involvement," I said. "Admitting such a thing will lead to economic sanctions from the international community, at the very least. Friede might be an irresponsible fool, but plenty of talented individuals work with the king. They won't let that happen and will refuse to acknowledge any charge unless they face definitive evidence."

Others would have been surprised to hear me criticize Friede, the crown prince of a large nation; it appeared Lucas had informed Ygul of my true identity. Considering how bold I'd been when approaching Lucas, it did not shock me a few people knew about me. Regardless, I was fairly certain Lucas had only told people he

could trust.

Lucas had sent Ygul here after learning that I was at the head of the volunteer army so that he could act as a bridge between us.

"What are Lord Lucas's plans?" I asked.

"He intends to keep moving east while liberating the villages under Sarjan control. Ultimately, he'll take back Broccen Fortress."

"I see. Did he say what he wanted us to do?"

"He hopes you'll do the same."

"All right. I would like to point out that I kept this force small to prioritize speed. We can free villages but we won't be able to leave people behind to defend them all."

"That's fine. We'll take care of that."

"Great, thank you."

Our conversation ended, and Ygul prepared to return to Lucas's camp. He'd brought two guards, though I dispatched four men from the Swift Drake Mercenary Corps to ensure he'd get there safely.

"Please send Lord Lucas my regards," I told him.

"I shall, Miss Ellie. Let us meet again in the east, in the grassy field next to Broccen Fortress."

After bidding him farewell, I got Mireille to gather everyone.

We were heading east.

◇

Our group set out east shortly after Ygul left. We encountered several villages along the way and stressed liberating each of them from the Sarjan and Haldorian, annihilating the troops we found there before moving on.

While there were thankfully no other villages where the invaders had massacred most of the population, there were still some casualties and damage to deplore. We didn't have the manpower to take care of them, so we left those people in the hands of the soldiers Lucas dispatched.

We advanced along the large road that bordered the forest, and the sun had just passed its zenith when I decided it was time for a break.

No sooner had we stopped than Mireille came to me.

"Miss Ellie," she started. "I have a report from the scouts we sent ahead. They've located what appears to be the viscount's army based on their coat of arms."

“Good, let us join them, then. Send a messenger from the Swift Drake Mercenary Corps ahead of us,” I said.

“At once, miss.”

Should we approach them without a word, Lucas’s troops may mistake us for enemies. They’d seen the scouts from the Swift Drake Mercenary Corps before, and I wanted one to warn them ahead of time.

A couple of hours later, I found myself in the heart of Lucas’s camp, inside the large tent he used as his temporary headquarters.

“It’s been a while, my lord,” I greeted.

“It has, indeed. Thank you for coming, Miss Ellie. You and your volunteer army have been of great help to us,” said Lucas.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“So, tell me, how is the village you invested in faring? Any damage?”

The production base Traitre had recently acquired was fairly close to this place. In fact, we’d disposed of the Sarjan occupying it a couple of days ago.

“No human losses to deplore. But the goods and supplies I sent got requisitioned.”

“I see... Well, I suppose we should rejoice that no lives were lost...”

“Indeed, life is invaluable, after all. Goods do have value, though. And I’ll make sure to get back every last coin,” I answered with a smile, barely bothering to conceal my rage.

Lucas responded with an awkward smile.

We then discussed our next move and decided to work together to take back Broccen Fortress. Joining forces meant that Lucas now stood above me in the chain of command. However, I retained control over the volunteer army and could still make most decisions.

After two days of marching east together, our scouts spotted Broccen Fortress and helped set up camp once more. Lucas immediately called a strategic meeting. He summoned Ygul, the commander of his army, and a couple of officers from his side, as well as me, Mireille, Elsa, and Julius, the commander of the Swift Drake Mercenary Corps.

“All right. Do we all agree on attacking the fortress tonight with a small elite force?”

“Yes. I don’t think we have another option.”

“Attacking a fortress is never easy. We have the numerical advantage, and we could get it to fall with a large-scale offensive. It would take time…and we’d have to prepare to lose many men in the battle.”

I very much agreed with this assessment. Broccen Fortress was a stronghold where we’d have to face the ballistae and catapults mounted on its walls even if we attacked from the rear, not the front. Not to mention, the enemy had powerful soldiers who had taken it in one day in the first place.

A frontal attack would lead to far too many needless casualties. This situation left us with one option: launching a surprise attack with a small elite force comprising Divine Artifact users. That meant Lucas, Elsa, Dreg, the commander of Lucas’s army, and I would attack as the rest of the army surrounded the fortress from the outside.

Four people taking over a fortress alone sounded reckless, but I didn’t necessarily think it was the case. Divine Artifacts users were powerful enough to make it work.

“Do we know if they have any Divine Artifact users?” asked Lucas.

“We haven’t heard of any so far,” answered Dreg.

Oh my. Now’s the time to share the information I have. “A Haldorian force came to reinforce Sarjas’s army,” I said. “Prince Friede, who appears to be leading them, and his guard, Robert Arty, are Divine Artifact users.”

“Prince Friede, huh? He has a way to complicate every situation, does he not?” commended Lucas.

“Still, I highly doubt a prince would remain on the front line and risk his life,” said Dreg. “As soon as the tide of the battle tips in our favor, the two of them will most likely flee.”

I agreed. Friede despised Haldoria’s vassal states and would never risk his life for them. He’d run away the minute we attacked. *In fact, he may very well be long gone.*

Now that I thought about it, that second option sounded very likely.

“I concur,” I said. “The crown prince will not put himself in danger when this battle means so little to Haldoria.”

“Right,” said Lucas, nodding. “As long as the Sarjan does not have any Divine Artifact user, we should be fine.”

“I only know of one Divine Artifact user in the Sarjan army: the head of the Royal Guard. He would never leave the king unprotected, so we can safely assume he won’t be there.”

“This means the only potential threat is that infamous mercenary corps we’ve all heard about.”

“Indeed,” I agreed. “And this is exactly why I’d like you, Lord Lucas, and Commander Dreg to attack from the south. We cannot afford to endanger this territory’s viscount and the commander of his army.”

“I don’t follow.”

“What do you mean, Miss Ellie?”

I explained that, according to the intelligence we’d gathered, Sarjas’s regular army controlled the southern part of the fortress. Meanwhile, the mercenaries and adventurers were in charge of the northern part.

We were far more likely to encounter strong foes on the northern side.

“Wide-scale spells are my specialty. And Elsa is a Rank A adventurer. Even if we encounter a foe we can’t handle, we’ll be able to flee,” I added.

Dreg mumbled something but ultimately stopped himself from answering. He obviously knew who I really was and was deferring to his lord.

“All right,” Lucas finally said after a long pause. “But promise me you’ll prioritize your safety. If they put up too much resistance, pull back. We can draw this out if we need to.”

“Of course,” I said.

Our offensive would start tonight.

Thanks to the prisoners, we knew at what time the Sarjan lookouts relieved one another. In the evenings, war veterans took over the unreliable, inexperienced soldiers to handle surveillance during the night. Right before the switch, when the inexperienced soldiers were at the peak of their exhaustion, it was the best time to strike.

Our plan to take back Broccen Fortress was in motion.

◇

After the war council finished deliberating, Elsa returned to her party's tent.

As soon as she stepped in, her teammates greeted her.

"Oh, there you are, Miss Elsa."

"Finally back?"

"It's good to see you."

Elsa immediately told her comrades about the meeting.

"So you'll attack with only four people," whispered Sicily, pensive.

"I-Isn't that too dangerous?" asked Marty, worried.

Elsa tapped her shoulder lightly and said, "It'll be fine. The other three, Viscount Lebrick, Commander Dreg, and Miss Ellie, are also Divine Artifact users. And it doesn't look like the enemy has that many strong fighters."

"I'm sure she'll be able to flee easily with her Divine Artifact if the situation calls for it, so don't worry, Marty," said Sicily.

"Exactly. The viscount even allowed us to retreat if things go south."

"That's good to hear," expressed Marty.

Elsa's Divine Artifact suited such situations, allowing her to escape sticky situations. Her comrades agreeing so readily to her taking on this mission was a testament to their trust in its power.

"Still, I'm surprised to hear that Miss Ellie herself will take part in the assault," said Marty.

"Same here. She's great with both swords and magic, but isn't her Divine Artifact that book that lets her store things? That doesn't sound like an asset in combat at all," mused Lisa.

"What bugs me the most is that Viscount Lebrick and the officers of his army all walk on eggshells around her. There's got to be some sort of reason for that," continued Marty.

Elsa also couldn't help but feel like something about Ellie was off. She was far too knowledgeable about the Sarjan and Haldorian militaries—up to the point she knew who their Divine Artifact users were.

Plenty of merchants liked to keep themselves informed, not making it impossible she'd somehow gained these pieces of information. Yet Elsa had felt like there was something personal about how Ellie referred to the Haldorian prince and his guard.

She'd sensed the bloodthirst concealed behind her words.

Although Elsa became curious, she had not brought it up because...

"Cut it out, you two." The untalkative Sarina emerged from her silence to chide Lisa and Marty. "Don't pry."

"You're right," agreed Lisa.

"Sorry..." apologized Marty.

"Sarina's right," said Elsa. "Mind your own business if you want to live a long life."

"'The God of Death answers to the name Curiosity,' or so the saying goes, right?"

"A very wise saying. We spoke out of turn—thank you for the warning."

Plenty of secrets were best left uncovered.

◇

I was in my tent, checking my equipment. That included my pierce-proof cape, which was also enchanted to resist magic to some extent before putting it on. Then I moved on to the bracer I always wore on my left arm before attaching Flügel at my waist. I placed two daggers on the opposite side and some throwing knives hidden inside my cape.

The point of this operation was not stealthiness. We'd break in and wipe out the invaders. Instead of focusing on light equipment that allowed me to sneak around unnoticed, I prioritized firepower and defense.

"I'm off," I said.

"I'll be praying for your safety, miss."

"You stay safe too, Mireille."

While the four of us attacked the fortress, the volunteer army and Lucas's army would surround it. I'd left Mireille in command of the former while I was away.

After waving a quick goodbye to my trusted confidant, I left my tent. The sun had already started setting.

One hour to go until the assault.

Elsa joined me and we made our way north of the fortress. Because there was a rocky cliff not far from it, we hid there until it was time.

“It’s almost time,” I said.

“Yes. I’ll go for the watchtower and you for the garrison, right?” asked Elsa to confirm.

“Correct. As soon as you’re in, kill as many of them as you can. We need to deal a severe blow from the start.”

“No prisoners this time, was it?”

“No need for prisoners. If you spot someone who seems important enough and can capture them alive, you may do so. But this isn’t our priority,” I explained. “Do not kill noncombatants if you can help it, though.”

“Understood. For all we know, they may be forcing kidnapped villagers to work for them.”

Some villagers had gone missing after the Kingdom of Sarjas attacked, likely captured and tasked to perform odd jobs for the Sarjan army.

If that was the case, these people were probably being treated like slaves while being paid a small wage. Doing so allowed the armies who did such things to pretend they’d simply hired civilians rather than unjustly enslave them. It was a loophole in the international laws of war.

“Now.”

“Let’s go.”

I started running toward the wall of the fortress, aiming for my target while Elsa dashed toward hers.

While noticing an army approaching was easy, spotting a single person in the twilight was rather difficult. I approached unnoticed and threw a handful of knives at the wall as I approached it, reinforcing them with magic. They plunged into the wall with about half of the blade sticking out, and I swiftly kicked off of them to get on top of the wall.

The two men standing lookout on the wall let out a surprised shriek.

They had most likely been in the middle of an idle chat and had never expected an enemy to appear so suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere.

I did not give them any time to regain their bearing and swung my blade. I ducked and waited quietly to see if someone would come, alerted by their bodies hitting the floor. When no one did, I peeked at the courtyard that served as a garrison for the mercenaries and adventurers.

Tents filled out the area, and armed men sat here and there, most likely enjoying a break after eating dinner.

A powerful large-scale spell could take out at least half of them in one go, though I'd need some time to cast it. If anyone with a high sensitivity to magic were among them, they'd notice me before I could finish. Besides, several villagers were also present.

I should prioritize speed over might here. "Ice Rain," I chanted.

A gigantic magic circle appeared in the sky, and icicles befell the courtyard. This spell was not powerful enough to kill anyone, but the sudden attack sent the invaders into a frenzy.

The pieces of ice varied in size. Some were as small as a pebble, while others were as large as a person's head. Said pieces were also dense enough to crack bones, meaning someone would lose consciousness if the bigger ones landed on their head.

I took advantage of the confusion to jump into the courtyard, landing and swinging my blade at the nearby apparent group of adventurers. Even though I left the servants alone, as I assumed some were unrelated villagers, I killed every armed fighter I encountered.

As the Ice Rain dissipated, the bell signaling an enemy attack finally echoed. The invaders had gotten over the initial shock and were lunging and firing magic spells at me.

"We're under attack! The enemy's here!"

"That bitch killed Fred!"

"Damn it! Damn— Urgh?!"

"Andy!"

I dashed through the enemy lines, inflicting deadly wounds on every man or woman I crossed paths with.

These people were mercenaries and soldiers, not brigands or professional soldiers. Since they'd accepted contracts that involved standing on the battlefield, they ought to have prepared themselves for the consequences.

I was very much prepared and had come here to kill whoever stood in my way.

"There! It's her!" exclaimed someone, pointing at me.

"Surround her! Those who have shields to the front!"

Some of them moved along pretty well and had decent ideas.

My enemies reorganized, sticking close to one another as the muscular shield bearers rushed to the front. Behind them was a row of spear-throwers and another of archers completing the formation.

This was one of the most elementary yet battle-proven formations.

"Mercenaries," I concluded. "But they can't be that infamous group."

They obviously had some experience, but I couldn't picture these people taking Broccen Fortress in a day.

"Freezing winds and shining sighs... O fatal storm, answer to the call of the wolf of ice and snow, Fenrir," I chanted. "Blizzard Breath!"

A deadly blizzard blew at the dense group, and they froze to death in an instant.

I'd just used an advanced spell after reciting the entire incantation. The power of such spells failed compared to the ones I could silently cast. Every last drop of their blood had frozen solid.

If there were some magicians in their midst, they might have had some resistance to magic. But I very much doubted that could have saved them.

"She can use magic!"

"That ice from earlier must have been her doing!"

"You witch! How da— Argh!"

A witch, huh? They weren't wrong.

"Freezing Earth," I said, covering the ground in silvery ice.

"M-My feet!"

"I can't move!"

Now that I had stopped them from running around, I could focus on finishing off every single one of them.

◆

"She must be putting on quite the show," whispered Elsa, glancing toward the screams she kept hearing. Elsa had ventured pretty far from where Ellie was, but even she could feel the merchant's icy mana.

"Think you can look away in the middle of a fight?!" exclaimed a brawny adventurer, bringing down his large claymore on Elsa.

Elsa slashed at the claymore with her blade, easily deviating it.

"Well, yes," she said casually.

The weight of his sword disrupted the man's balance, and Elsa severed his head with a single blow.

Unlike Ellie, Elsa wasn't great at attacking several opponents at

once. Thankfully, she had a few to deal with and easily managed them without so much as breaking a sweat.

She suddenly felt the vibrations of an arrow cutting through the air behind her and blocked it with her blade without looking back.

"Take this!" roared someone as a spear closed in on her.

She dodged by a hair's breadth, then a group of fighters wearing leather armor quickly surrounded her.

"Pfft," Elsa let out as she moved it to stab one of the men on the edge of the formation.

Before her sword could reach its target, another man stepped in and blocked it with his shield. A third man took advantage of that gap in her guard to attack her as yet another shot an arrow at her back.

Elsa clicked her tongue, leaped, dodged, and distanced herself from the assailants.

These people were nothing like the disorderly crowd she'd been fighting until now. They were a proper military group with remarkable training; Elsa immediately realized that she'd stumbled upon the mercenaries they'd been wary about.

"You're pretty good. Are you guys the rumored mercenary group?" probed Elsa.

"I had no idea there were rumors about us, but being praised by a powerful fighter like you sure feels great," a man answered.

He had short blond hair, and a large horizontal scar ran through his face. Like the others, he was wearing leather armor that was of slightly better quality.

He's probably their leader, assumed Elsa.

Sure enough, he started screaming orders at his men the very next moment.

"She's strong, so keep your guard up! Don't move in too far, and back up your companions! We'll surround her and wear her down little by little!"

The mercenaries followed their leader's orders to a T and slowly approached Elsa while making sure not to leave any gaps in their formation.

Elsa clicked her tongue once more.

These men were even more formidable than expected. Taken individually, none of them could hold a candle to her, but there was little she could do against such cooperation. Whenever she tried to attack one of them, his comrades stopped her.

They also dutifully respected the chain of command. She'd tried to lure some of them in several times by creating fake gaps in her stance. Yet the men had taken their leader's orders to heart—none of them bit.

For the time being, most of their attacks only inflicted scratches. She'd eventually tire herself out if she didn't break the status quo. After two dozen attacks, she could already feel her body growing heavier and her concentration slipping away.

Elsa was panting, but the leader remained calm.

"Don't rush in!" he shouted to his men. "Keep the formation up until the end!"

He gripped his sword tightly as he also slashed at her. His proficiency with a sword was also worthy of leading an elite corps, being head and shoulders above the others.

While Elsa busied herself with him, an arrow grazed her shoulder, adding to the number of wounds the adventurer was suffering from.

"I'm dead if this keeps up..." said Elsa, groaning.

"Glad you realize that. Would you like to surrender yet?" asked the man.

"You make funny jokes," she jested.

"I'm curious to see what else you think you can do."

"That," Elsa stated before chanting, "Divine Artifact, Spada della Fenice."

She hurled the sword she'd been using until now at the face of the mercenaries' leader as her Divine Artifact materialized in her hand—a long sword engraved with blazing red wings.

"Tsk! She's got a Divine Artifact!" screamed the leader. "Step back!"

However, Elsa moved in quicker than they could retreat. Those who held shields lowered their center of gravity and braced for the hit to come, although the adventurer did not seem to mind. She casually slashed at them, sending them flying back.

They couldn't believe the woman whose attacks they had easily blocked mere seconds ago had become so strong. She seemed like an entirely different person.

"Damn! It's the kind that boosts physical abilities!"

It was common for Divine Artifact users to grow stronger when they materialized their weapons because it stimulated their mana. But the boost Elsa had just received was far beyond the normal.

For the most part, her Spada della Fenice was only a regular sword that buffed her somewhat. She rarely needed that and didn't take it out often on the battlefield.

Still, it had a few particularities.

Such was the effect when Elsa sustained more injuries. The worse her situation became, the more her physical prowess improved and the sharper the edge of her sword became. It was a straightforward yet fearsome ability.

Thanks to her Divine Artifact, she had returned from the brink of death countless times, eventually earning a nickname—Elsa the Phoenix.

◇

"EEK! L-Let me go!!!" begged one of my opponents, dropping his weapon to the floor and putting his hands up in a show of surrender.

I ignored his pleas and drove my sword into him, sighing before looking around. The entire area had turned into a sea of blood and ice—a world of silvery crystals and crimson blossoms. It would become the last resting place for these adventurers and mercenaries.

"It would appear I drew the short straw," I said no to one in particular.

The infamous mercenaries were not here. Just as I wondered whether I could have killed them without even noticing it, I felt a sudden surge of mana—Elsa's.

"Did she just—"

There was no mistaking that particular flow of mana.

"—materialize her Divine Artifact?"

Since I'd told them about my Divine Artifact, Elsa had shared the nature of her own with me. From what she'd said, it only revealed its true power when she was in a crisis.

"Looks like she found them."

This mercenary corps bothered me. I'd make sure to get rid of them here to prevent any more surprises.

My mind was clear, and I started running toward Elsa when I noticed a pillar of fire at the edge of my field of vision.

Lucas's magic, I assumed.

His father's sudden passing had forced Lucas to inherit his title at a rather young age, but he'd served as one of the magic knights of the Yutear Empire. I'd heard he was a very talented magician with an affinity for fire attribute spells. Dreg, a veteran warrior, was also by his side, so I wasn't worried about him.

"Who the hell are you?! Stop!"

I slashed at the man who tried to stop me without bothering to slow down, going around the fortress until I reached an open area. A group of about thirty mercenaries were there, surrounding Elsa.

The fight seemed close at first glance, but I could tell Elsa was

struggling.

"Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Beelzebub," I chanted.

The mercenaries must have sensed my mana because those who stood closest to me turned at once and exclaimed, "There's another intruder!"

"Air Slash, Rock Needle, Fire Bullet!" I proclaimed, casting three spells back-to-back, thanks to the power of my grimoire.

Most mercenaries were busy fighting Elsa and were too slow to react. Air Slash got blocked, yet the fiery bullets sent a couple flying while the stone thorns that erupted from the ground pierced through leather and skin alike.

Panic took over the mercenaries.

"How can she cast spells of different attributes all at once?!"

"What the hell's going on?!"

"Must be a Divine Artifact!"

"Damn it! That newcomer just had to be a Divine Artifact user too!"

Perfect. I'll take this chance to wipe them out. "Fire Lance," I chanted.

"Don't lose your cool!" screamed a man with a large scar on his face, jumping in front of his agitated comrades and repelling the blazing lance I'd just fired with his sword. "Don't panic! We move on to Plan D! Retreat! Squad Gato, you're with me! We'll guard the rear!"

That man—their leader, in all likelihood—helped them regain their composure with only a few words. The group swiftly reorganized, moving as though it was a single entity.

They were far more efficient than the Sarjan troops.

"Elsa!" I exclaimed.

"I know!" she replied immediately.

I left the leader to Elsa, sneaked past him, and started gathering mana into my grimoire to fire a few more spells at the retreating men. The scarred man, however, let the unit that had stayed behind with him engage Elsa and quickly caught up to me.

He tried to stab me, but I dodged and answered with a slash of my own aimed at his torso. Instead of dodging or using his shield, he raised his sword to parry.

I gasped, surprised, and stopped in my tracks. I stepped firmly on the ground with my right foot and twisted my body, doing a half-turn and using my bracer to block his blade.

“Judging by your reaction, this truly is Flügel, one of the swords of legend!” the man shouted. “I’d heard this sword was kept in some king’s treasury, yet... Who would have thought I’d get to see it here?”

Even as he spoke, the leader did not stop moving his arm, slashing at me again and again. I continued to guard with my bracer.

That man knew what he was doing and carried out the best possible way to deal with Flügel. Its blade, so thin that you could see through it, had been crafted by sharpening a heavenly dragon’s fang to its very limit. The sword was sharp enough to cut through virtually anything, including mithril, but it was also as fragile as glass. Let alone parrying, a badly executed swing at an unnatural angle could shatter it.

Thankfully, storing Flügel away in its scabbard—also crafted from material harvested on a heavenly dragon—restored any damage to the blade. But that process required time.

Basically, I could not use it to block or deflect my opponent’s attacks.

The leader of the mercenaries seemed perfectly aware of Flügel’s weaknesses and kept attacking, aiming for my blade every time.

I glanced in Elsa’s direction and saw that, while she’d already defeated a few men of the rearguard, she wasn’t yet in a position to help me. Her enemies threw themselves at her, disregarding their safety to keep her busy.

“How come I’ve never heard of you?” the leader asked me, not relenting. “An adventurer of your caliber should certainly make people talk.”

“I’m not an adventurer,” I answered honestly. “I’m a merchant.”

I continued to block and dodge while looking for an opportunity to use magic. Before I found one, though, the sound of a flute reached my ears.

“Finally, huh?” I heard the man whisper.

Suddenly, he threw a small sphere at me and leaped back. The sphere exploded, and a bright flash of light filled my vision. It was a magic item designed to blind your opponent!

I immediately stepped back and braced myself for an attack, but nothing happened. My vision gradually cleared, and I noticed the leader and the rest of his surviving men running away at full speed.

His comrades seemed to have used the same scheme on Elsa.

A little farther away was a young man wearing beautiful, shining armor and a group of armed men who appeared to be his guards. They did not budge and seemingly waited for the mercenaries.

"Him!" I exclaimed, surprised.

I remembered that young man! It was Grint Sarjas, prince of the Kingdom of Sarjas.

"Elsa!" I shouted to get her attention.

"Yes!" she replied promptly, dashing toward the group at the same time as me.

The prince was most likely their general, though he waited patiently for the mercenaries who'd obviously been buying time a few moments ago. That could only mean they had a way to escape in an instant.

As soon as he reached them, the leader of the mercenaries took out a parchment with an intricate magic circle drawn on it.

So what they had was a magic scroll...

"Gate!" he screamed.

Over twenty men disappeared at once, leaving behind a peculiar tranquility.

While we failed to capture their prince, we'd defeated the Sarjan Army and successfully taken back Broccen Fortress.

Lucas promptly called for a meeting, and soon, the crucial members assembled in the room designated for war councils within the fortress.

He sighed deeply and said, "We managed to drive the Sarjan away for now, but the issue is what comes next."

In the Kingdom of Haldoria, many nobles viewed commoners as replaceable laborers with little value. However, the imperial nobility held a distinct perspective. Imperial law explicitly stated that all imperial subjects belonged to His Majesty the Emperor. Even countryside villagers could not suffer harm, as doing so equaled laying one's hand on the emperor's property.

If Lucas brought this matter to an end just like this, he would have left the grave offense of harming the emperor's possessions unanswered. He'd be mocked as a coward who refused to uphold the emperor's honor—or worse, he'd be branded a traitor.

In other words, this conflict was not over.

Lucas had two options. He could either demand an official apology and compensation or retaliate directly with military action.

Considering the exhaustion of his troops, the diplomatic route appeared to be the wisest choice. But that came with another issue: the Kingdom of Sarjas and the Yutear Empire had no diplomatic relations.

Besides, neither Friede—who'd orchestrated this entire sham behind the scenes—nor the Kingdom of Haldoria would receive punishment. Lucas would ask for their crimes to be recognized, of course; the slowness of the negotiations would give Haldoria ample time to bury the evidence.

The idiotic king would surely approve of the investigation. But his prime minister, Duke Leiston, would never let incriminating evidence see the light of day. While Bulat wasn't the brightest, he still knew to trust the duke and would let him do whatever it took.

That left us with only one choice.

Lucas seemed to have reached the same conclusion as me, and he braced himself before declaring, "We shall...march on to the Kingdom of Sarjas."

◆

In a comfortable room of the royal palace of Sarjas was a young man sprawled on a sofa with a glass of wine in hand—Friede. He had his legs outstretched and wore an unpleasant expression. Next to the crown prince of the Kingdom of Haldoria sat another prince, Grint Sarjas, who looked just as frustrated, if not more. Robert Arty, Friede's knight, stood beside the wall. His eyes on the princes with an expression schooled to conceal the myriads of conflicting thoughts running through his mind.

"I can't believe you couldn't even take and hold a single fortress from some countryside lord! That's why I hate second-rate countries! Useless, the lot of you," yelled Friede, sighing.

Grint remained silent. If he talked back, Haldoria would withhold aid, and his people would be the ones who suffered. And so he gritted his teeth as he desperately stopped himself from retorting.

As he watched the scene unfold, Robert couldn't help but wonder if what he was doing—what he *had* done—was correct.

When Friede had allowed the soldiers to raid villages, Robert

asked him to reconsider repeatedly. The international community would not let attacks on civilians slide, he'd told him. But Friede had refused to budge.

Robert could see a few upsides: it had kept the troops' morale high, and they'd saved money on rewards. Deep down, he knew the real reason behind the prince's decision was a hatred for the Yutear Empire.

Besides, he agreed with Friede on one point. While what they'd done was strictly forbidden by the international law of war, it was very unlikely that the Yutear Empire would retaliate vehemently for a few villagers. Waging a war was costly, after all.

Moreover, Robert was in love with Sylvia Lockit. Needless to say, he knew that she'd given her heart to the man in front of him, and he'd long come to terms with the fact that he couldn't compete with a prince in any way. Thus, he'd resolved to devote his blade to the two of them—his master and friend as well as the woman he loved.

However, he didn't know anymore whether the choice he'd made was the right one.

His bright and social friend was becoming more and more irritable by the day. Prince Friede often took it out on his retainers and had stopped taking Robert's advice into account altogether.

Now that Robert thought about it, Friede started exhibiting this behavior after casting away Elizabeth, his former fiancée.

"You absolute moron!"

A few days after Bulat had returned from the international conference and calm had returned to the palace, a man barged into Robert's room, screaming. The man punched Robert, easily overpowering the training knight. Robert bumped into the table, and it collapsed alongside him as he looked up to the one who'd just hit him.

"What are you doing, father?!"

Ernest, Bulat's knight commander, had been away with the king and returned a couple of days after tending to some more things. His first stop had been his son's room.

"How dare you even ask, you shameless imbecile?!" shouted Ernest.

"What?! Take this back! You may be my father, but you have no right to disrespect me like that!"

“You want to talk about disrespect?! This is nothing compared to the way you treated Lady Leiston!” roared Ernest.

Robert shuddered. He didn’t want to appear like a little kid, trembling at his father’s anger, and retorted, “Elizabeth hurt Lady Sylvia! I did what I had to do to protect her as the knight of His Highness...”

“Quiet! You think you’re a knight?! You violently grabbed a lady in front of the entire court! Is that what you think knights are?! Have you ever seen Lady Leiston hurt anyone with your own two eyes?! Is that your idea of justice?! Assaulting ladies before receiving judgment?! And you dare call her Elizabeth? Since when were you noble enough to speak the name of the lady of House Leiston so casually?! A fool who doesn’t know his place is no knight!” screamed Ernest. “Don’t think Lady Leiston couldn’t have pushed a weakling like you away. She must have let herself get manhandled to avoid harming His Highness’s reputation. And yet, you don’t even seem to realize that... How ridiculous. Do you think what you did was right? Do you think this is in His Highness’s best interest? In the kingdom’s best interest? Can you swear you did not let your personal grudge cloud your judgment?!”

Robert groaned but did not answer, as he already knew. He’d simply been lying to himself and pretending his motives were pure.

Back in their student days, Elizabeth had always been better than him. No matter how hard he trained or how many times he swung his sword, he couldn’t catch up to her.

He was fully aware that the education Elizabeth had received was special. She’d been prepared to take on her role as Friede’s queen since she was a child. The talented young lady had excelled in every discipline, from her studies and etiquette to her control of mana and fighting abilities. A queen, after all, was expected to become the last rampart that protected the king in the event of an attack.

The late queen and the king’s consort, currently on the Southern Continent, were stronger than regular knights from what he knew.

Still, as a man and son of the knight commander, Robert had always wanted to best Elizabeth.

“I will not lie and say I’ve never envied Elizabeth,” said Robert. “However, I’ve done the right thing. I accomplished my duty as a knight by following His Highness’s— Argh!”

Ernest punched his son in the middle of his sentence.

"You're a fool. His Majesty had decided not to punish you and the prince. Instead, Lady Leiston will become the scapegoat that bears your sins for the sake of the country. In other words, you're still Prince Friede's knight," stated Ernest. "For the record, I wanted you stripped of all your privileges and made into a common soldier. The king and prime minister did not agree...for punishing you would be akin to admitting His Highness was in the wrong. I cannot oppose their decision, so I can only advise you to take a good look at what you've become. Do better, son."

At these words, Robert's father walked away.

One year went by since they had this talk. At the time, Robert resented his father and mother for taking Elizabeth's side, even though she'd caused the woman he loved so much pain. Now, he realized that his father had been right. There had never been any proof to back Sylvia's claims. He'd trusted her and Friede, even deeming Elizabeth evil, but he wasn't so sure anymore.

"Hey! Robert! Are you listening to me?!" complained Friede, pulling his knight out of his contemplation.

"O-Of course!" responded Robert.

"Because that incompetent idiot fled with his tail between his legs, his army got crushed, and I didn't leave behind any accomplishments! I want *you* to go back to the empire and annihilate these barbarians for me instead!"

"As you wish..." answered Robert, stopping himself from speaking what was on his mind.

◇

We marched on the Kingdom of Sarjas, sweeping through the enemy's defense lines until we reached the last city that separated us from the royal capital of Sarjas.

The local governor, who'd heard of our previous victories, did not bother fighting. As soon as he saw us arrive, he waved the white flag and invited us into the city instead.

Lucas had not committed any unreasonable acts in the cities and villages that had fallen so far and promised to maintain the positions of those who yielded and accepted the empire's annexation. These two facts had most likely influenced the

governor's decision.

We had once again gathered for yet another war council, this time in one of the rooms of the governor's residence.

"Only the capital is left," I said.

"Indeed. We've barely suffered any losses during our advance, and this last battle shall be no different if the capital's defenses are as we were told."

As Lucas had stated, we had suffered almost no casualties. Needless to say, the relative weakness of the Sarjan army was not enough to explain such a feat.

"This is all thanks to you, Lord Robert," I said, facing the man who sat next to me.

The real reason we'd managed such a stellar campaign was Robert, who'd fed us all the information on Sarjas he had gathered. He'd returned to the border with an army on Friede's orders. When he noticed me, he halted the battle before it started and requested a meeting.

After our discussion, he'd decided to leave Friede's side to join me. I could tell he still had doubts, and I smiled softly.

"I..." he trailed off.

"I understand your feelings," I said. "Betraying the master you swore to serve must be tough on you. But as you know...what Prince Friede is doing is wrong. If you're truly his friend, you should do everything in your power to set him back on the right path, don't you think?"

"Lady Elizabeth... You... You're right! His Highness isn't acting like himself! I'll bear the dishonor of betraying him if that's the price to pay for him to come back to his senses!"

"I'll do everything I can to guarantee your safety and position," promised Lucas. "That depends on the Haldorian government's reaction, of course. But you might be allowed to return to the kingdom if things go well."

"I'm much obliged, Lord Lucas." Robert's expression had brightened up a great deal.

After the meeting, I returned to the room that had been assigned to me when Robert stopped me.

"Lady Elizabeth," he called.

"Lord Robert? What can I do for you?"

He walked up to me and bowed deeply.

"I'm so sorry!"

“Lord Robert?”

“I did something unforgivable to you last year,” he started. “I blindly believed everything His Highness and Lady Sylvia told me without verifying whether it was true, and... Because of that, you were forced to flee your homeland...”

I put a hand on Robert’s shoulder and said, “This is all in the past now. Besides, I’m enjoying my current life as a merchant, you know?”

“But—”

“It’s all my fault,” I cut him off. “Things turned out like this because I couldn’t build a good relationship with His Highness. Please don’t worry about it anymore.” I took Robert’s hands into my own, resting the tips of my fingers on his wrists. “You’re trying to do the right thing at the cost of your honor, Lord Robert. Your resolve and your blade shall protect the lives of countless people, so please believe in yourself.”

“Lady Elizabeth...”

“Don’t call me that. I’m Ellie Leis, now,” I said playfully, letting Robert go before walking off and leaving him blushing.

◆

Everything had come to a standstill at the royal capital of the Kingdom of Sarjas, making the usual liveliness of the streets and the royal palace almost seem like a lie. The people cowered in their houses, their doors and windows shut and barred.

Why? Because, at last, the imperial army had reached the city walls.

News of the current war had long reached the ears of the people of the capital. The Haldorian prince had led an army to aid them but had allowed his men to slaughter civilians. But the Yutear Empire had responded by invading the Kingdom of Sarjas in retaliation.

Ellie had worked hard to ensure the story would spread far and wide. She’d also guaranteed everyone knew that, unlike the Haldorian troops, the imperial army was well disciplined. As long as they did not resist, no civilians would suffer harm.

The people of the capital had swiftly made their choice, keeping a low profile and waiting for the storm to pass. A heavy atmosphere had taken over the royal palace of Sarjas.

“Well, this is the end...” said one of the king’s ministers with a grim expression.

“Indeed, resisting would be futile.”

“Where is His Highness Prince Friede?”

“That cowardly prince ran back to the Kingdom of Haldoria a few days ago.”

“Watch your tongue! How dare you insult His Highness?!”

“Why shouldn’t I? Haldoria has forsaken us! You read the note he left, didn’t you? ‘The Kingdom of Sarjas started this war, so it is up to you to end it. Don’t bring the Kingdom of Haldoria into your mess. We will not hesitate to use force if you cause trouble for us.’ Do you still think we need to respect that scum?!”

The ministers were getting even more heated as they discussed the situation until a stern voice echoed.

“Quiet,” ordered Zandra Sarjas, king of the Kingdom of Sarjas, who was sitting on the throne. He used a dignified tone that not even his exhaustion could obscure, bringing back silence into the throne room. “We have no choice but to capitulate to the empire. I will share the whole truth with them and beg for their forgiveness. I have heard that the imperial army did not needlessly harm civilians. I shall accept their terms so long as they promise to protect my people.”

“But, Your Majesty, while that might have been the doing of the Haldorian soldiers, imperial citizens were killed! I do not believe the empire will let that go just because we submit!”

“I’ve considered that matter already,” answered the king. “Prepare the documents to transfer the leadership of this country to the empire.”

“B-But—”

“You will follow your king’s orders.”

“Yes, Your Majesty...”

Zandra sent his ministers away. Once only his son and his trusted confidants remained, he spoke up again.

“Grint, where are Melty and Linessa?”

“Far from the capital,” his son responded.

Zandra’s face relaxed just as he heard his son had sent his wife and daughter to safety away from the capital.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I’ve been a foolish king,” stated Zandra.

“A-Absolutely not, my king—”

“Enough,” said the king, cutting off the head of his Royal Guard midsentence. “I’m well aware of what my actions have wrought. How could I pretend otherwise when I allowed my kingdom to fall into such chaos?”

“Your Majesty…”

“Grint, you know what to do, don’t you?”

“I do, Your Majesty…” said the prince after a brief pause. “Father…”

“Good. I hope you’ll forgive me for putting you through this, my son.”

The atmosphere in the throne room was tense, but Zandra was strangely calm as he took a dagger from his pocket. It was as though he had lifted a weight off his chest.

“This is the last thing this foolish king can do,” whispered Zandra to no one in particular before thrusting the blade into his chest.

Although the head of the Royal Guard advanced, Grint stopped him and approached instead. Grint looked at his father, struggling to breathe through the pain, then unsheathed his sword and beheaded him. Tears flowed freely down his cheeks.

“Your Highness… No, Your Majesty, what are your orders?”

Grint paused before answering, “Raise the white flag. We will negotiate with the Yutear Empire.”

The head of the Royal Guard, soon followed by the rest of Zandra’s confidants knelt at his feet and exclaimed, “Yes, Your Majesty!”

◇

After we reached the royal capital of Sarjas, we split our forces into three—the viscount’s army, my volunteers, and the Haldorian troops led by Robert—and set up camps. Lucas’s tent was at the center of our formation, and we gathered there to hold another meeting.

One of Lucas’s messengers suddenly barged in.

“I have a report for you, my lord! The Sarjan have raised a white flag, and Prince Grint has sent an envoy to request peace talks.”

“Bring him to me and make sure to remain courteous,” ordered

Lucas.

"At once!" exclaimed the messenger, running off to summon Grint.

"This was faster than I expected," I said.

"Indeed," replied Lucas. "All that is left is to see what kind of conditions they'll try to push during the negotiations... Miss Ellie, could I trouble you to join the talks?"

"Of course, my lord. I shall join you as the leader of the volunteer army."

"Perfect. Lord Robert, what would you like to do?"

"I'll participate too, if that's all right," said Robert.

"That's settled."

We waited for a while until Prince Grint, whom I'd seen briefly at the fortress, walked into Lucas's tent accompanied by a single guard.

I recognized the guard from a party back in Haldoria. It was the Kingdom of Sarjas's sole Divine Artifact user, the head of the Royal Guard.

Prince Grint's lips twisted into a bitter smile upon noticing Robert, who averted his eyes and was seemingly uncomfortable. The prince then spotted me, and his eyes widened.

"Lady Elizabeth..." he said, breathing out.

"It's been a while, Prince Grint," I greeted.

"I see... You must be the extraordinary merchant they told me about..."

He must have been referring to the mercenaries we'd fought. While I'd seen Grint at Broccen Fortress, it didn't seem like he'd noticed me back then.

After taking a moment to collect himself, Grint turned to Lucas.

"The Kingdom of Sarjas is ready to surrender to the Yutear Empire," he said.

"The Yutear Empire is inclined to accept your surrender," said Lucas after a pause. "But as you know, many imperial subjects lost their lives in this conflict. What are your thoughts concerning this matter?"

Grint exchanged a look with the head of the Royal Guard. The older man stepped forward and deposited a box on the table. Lucas's guards were alarmed, but he bade them to remain still by raising his hand.

"What is this?" asked Lucas.

“Please accept the Kingdom of Sarjas’s apology for the harm we caused the empire,” declared Grint, opening the box.

Inside was the head of a middle-aged man.

Lucas paused before asking me for confirmation, “Miss Ellie?”

“There is no mistake, my lord. That is King Zandra’s head,” I stated.

“King Zandra, the ninth monarch of the Kingdom of Sarjas,” Grint started, “accepted his responsibility and took his life. I have succeeded him as the next ruler of Sarjas. I shall gladly offer you my head if you deem my father’s not enough. All I ask is that the empire shows mercy to my people.”

Prince Grint, or rather, King Grint, bowed to Lucas.

“Your people will be safe,” said Lucas. “We, in the Yutear Empire, are not fond of slaughtering innocents. As for what will become of you… I shall leave that in the hands of His Majesty the Emperor. The repercussions of your actions impact not only my territory, after all. Once you’ve introduced a number of imperial administrators to your court, you’ll accompany me to the empire.”

“I understand. I thank you for your consideration, my lord.”

They would sort the details later, but the conflict was essentially over. After today, the Kingdom of Sarjas would be no more, and this land would become part of the Yutear Empire.

“I’m told that Prince Friede of the Kingdom of Haldoria was the instigator,” said Lucas. “If you have any proof of his involvements, give them to me.”

Grint nodded and related, “Friede ordered me to get rid of the evidence, but I’ve kept some documents. I will hand them over to you.”

I could see Lucas’s shoulders relax at Grint’s words. If he played his cards well, the international standing of the Kingdom of Haldoria would suffer greatly.

This conflict had only been trouble for my business. If it led to the kingdom taking a hit, I’d naturally rejoice. Grint would return to the palace shortly while we were getting ready to go out to see him off. But a soldier barged in, panicked.

We all stiffened as we watched the man drop to his knees in front of Lucas.

“R-Reporting! Black smoke is rising in the center of the city! We believe the cause to be explosions at the royal palace!”

“What?!”

We rushed out of the tent and saw several separated trails of black smoke rising from the palace.

"Wh-What in the world?!" exclaimed Grint.

"Your Majesty! We must put out the fire first!" urged the head of the Royal Guard.

"I-I know. You!" Grint addressed the servants he'd left in front of Lucas's tent. "Deploy the water magicians around the royal palace and—"

The roars of another few explosions interrupted him. Soon, smoke started rising, not only from the palace but from several other locations.

"Wh-What is happening?!"

Grint groaned and shouted, "It doesn't matter! Forget the palace! Focus on evacuating the citizens and don't let the fire spread!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!" responded the group of servants, rushing to fulfill their king's order.

"We will help evacuate the city and quell the fire," Lucas told Grint.

"I'm sorry...and thank you."

The citizens would undoubtedly panic should the imperial soldiers suddenly flood the city. Instead, Lucas sent in a small force composed of mainly water magicians.

All the other soldiers focused on putting together a field hospital to care for the wounded.

Since I could use water spells, I joined the firefighting squad Lucas had formed and rushed to the city.

◆

In the dark woods that bordered the capital, on the opposite side of the viscount's camp, was a group of individuals clad in black.

One of them, a man with a large scar on his face, whispered, "It's almost time."

Just as the leader of the mercenaries had predicted, the noise of an explosion filled the air as flames spread in the distance.

"Whatever evidence incriminates that idiotic prince should be gone forever... Probably," he said.

"Are you sure that's good enough?" asked one of his men. "The

fire may spare a few papers. Shouldn't we make sure to dispose of them all?"

"It's all good. Our orders were to get rid of the evidence *if possible*. No need to put ourselves in danger over this."

"Is that so?"

The leader watched the smoke rise for a few seconds before putting out his cigarette and standing up.

"All right, lads. We're done playing mercenaries. Let's go home. Second Lieutenant Connor?"

"Yes?"

"Split the men into several units and start moving. Make sure not to be followed."

"Understood! We shall head back immediately!"

"Take care."

"You too, Colonel Graham!"

"Yeah. See you back home."

The men split into several small groups and soon headed off.

◇

Half a month went by since the mysterious explosions had rocked the capital. We had occupied the city as soon as we'd restored order and begun an investigation. It soon became apparent that these blasts had been an attempt to sabotage our burgeoning collaboration with Sarjas.

The infamous mercenaries had disappeared without a trace, and we suspected them of being the culprits. In all likelihood, they'd done that to destroy whatever evidence linked Friede and Haldoria to this conflict, as the explosions in the castle had all occurred strangely close to the room where Grint kept his documents. Some burnt pages remained, but barely anything was distinguishable, making them fairly weak evidence.

We still had no idea who these mercenaries truly were. But one thing was almost certain: they moved with the Kingdom of Haldoria's best interests in mind.

As far as I knew, there was no such unit in Haldoria. It could have come about after I'd left the country, though they seemed far too experienced and used to working together. Thus, I couldn't help but suspect the involvement of a third party.

Ever since we'd taken the capital and won the war, Lucas and

Grint had been working conjunctly on ruling the country. I, on the other hand, hadn't interfered.

The new governor and officials sent by the emperor to take over Sarjas had finally arrived. With them here, it wouldn't be long before Grint followed Lucas to the imperial capital.

We, the volunteer army, weren't needed anymore, so I decided to return to the capital without delay.

On the day of departure, I gathered the key members of my force as well as Robert's to discuss the trip to come. Meanwhile, our troops waited diligently right outside the royal capital of Sarjas.

"Thank you for joining me," I started. "I believe it'd be wiser for our armies to travel separately to the capital, Lord Robert."

"Huh?" he uttered, perplexed. "Why?"

"Well...the battles have damaged the main road. So, I thought about having my army go through smaller paths and stop at villages on the way back. And while it is true you've deserted, I cannot imagine the local villagers would take kindly to your men staying anywhere near their homes."

"Y-You have a point..."

"You should make your way to the imperial capital while avoiding the villages as much as possible. That means taking perilous paths at times but with an army of trained regular soldiers. I'm sure you'll manage wonderfully. If you'd like, I'm happy to accompany you to show you the way. Don't worry!"

"All right... I'll take you up on that."

"It's settled, then. Mireille, I'll leave the volunteer army in your hands."

"Of course, Miss Ellie. Please be careful on the road," she responded.

I joined Robert, and we soon departed, making our way through the valley.

After several days of walking from dawn to dusk on trackless paths, exhaustion started catching up with Robert's men.

"Lady Ellie, would you mind if we took a break?" asked Robert. "The soldiers are almost at their limit."

"Oh my, is that right? The capital won't be far once we cross the valley so let us take a long break here."

We moved to an open space so that the soldiers could rest. I'd suggested this particular spot because high cliffs surrounded it, and we needed to pay attention to one direction to prevent attacks.

“Phew,” expressed Robert, sighing. “We’re almost there, right?”

“Yes. Only one day of walking left. We should get there tomorrow.”

“That’s good to hear,” replied Robert, then pausing briefly. “Lady Ellie… I’m truly sorry for everything. And I’m very thankful for what you’ve done for me despite how I treated you. Thank you for forgiving me. I’ll be sure to repay your kindness in full. I swear it on my honor as a knight.”

Robert smiled and bowed to me. I looked at him with confusion and tilted my head to the side.

“I’m not sure I follow,” I said. “When did I ever mention forgiving you?”

“Huh?”

“You appear to have misjudged my intentions. Do allow me to clear something up,” I continued. “I hate you so much that I want to kill you.”

“B-But… Didn’t you say…it was all in the past…”

“Well, it is. There’s no changing what happened, is there? I’m not sure why that should mean I’ve forgiven you.”

“L-Lady Ellie…”

“Now, now. We’re finally in the perfect place. Shall we get started?”

“Wh-What do you mean by that?”

“Lord Robert,” I said after an intentional pause. “What do you know about my Divine Artifact?”

“You… You mean your Grimoire of Wisdom?”

“No, that thing never existed. My real Divine Artifact is the Seven Grimoires. As the name suggests, I can materialize seven different grimoires with distinct abilities. This is the first—Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Beelzebub.”

As soon as I summoned it, I used my grimoire to create a stone wall and close off the only exit, trapping the rebel forces with me.

“Wh-What did you—”

“Next is this one,” I added, “Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Belphegor.”

Another tome appeared in my hand, and I punched Robert in the pit of his stomach with my other fist. He staggered, but I grabbed him by the collar before he could fall, concentrated the mana in my legs, and dragged him up the cliff.

He moaned in pain as I threw him to the ground once we’d

reached the top. I looked down at his men, who appeared bewildered by the stone wall that had come out of the blue.

Robert was panting when he asked, “Wh-What are you planning?!”

I did not gratify him with an answer. Instead, I took out a large magic stone from my pocket and threw it at the rebel forces.

Simply put, magic stones were crystallized mana formed in the bodies of monsters, which could be used to activate magic items or as catalysts for spells. They dissipated after use.

“O wandering servant of the darkness. O shapeless demon who sees with no eyes. O creature of hell. I offer you this magic stone in accordance with our contract. Heed my call! Summon: Primordial Ooze,” I chanted.

The magic stone shattered, and a dark light appeared, forming a magic circle midair. A viscous liquid started pouring down from it as the soldiers looked up, helpless.

Screams of terror and pain echoed around us as the viscous creature squirmed, extending countless tentacles all around as though it had a will of its own and grabbing the soldiers one after the other. It dissolved every last bit of flesh it came into contact with, devouring its victims voraciously.

“IT HURTS! IT HURTS!”

“NO! I’M MELTING! NOOO!!!”

“Wh-What is...that thing...?” whispered Robert as he watched his comrades melt and be consumed by the hellish monster I’d summoned.

“That’s a Primordial Ooze, a distant ancestor of the slimes. It normally lives in the depths of the demon world,” I explained.

“Why...? Why, Lady Ellie?”

“Isn’t it obvious? This is my revenge, Lord Robert.”

“If you seek revenge, why not just kill me?! Why are you doing this to innocent soldiers?!”

“No particular reason.”

“What?!”

“They were with you, so I killed them too. In a way, one could say they died because of you. Don’t you think? If it weren’t for you, they wouldn’t have suffered through the pain of being dissolved and eaten alive. They could have gotten home to their friends and families.”

“Because...of me...”

“Yes, Lord Robert. This is your sin. They’re simply victims of your ego. This happened because you played the righteous knight on your own accord.”

“Play…the righteous knight…?” he repeated, falling to his knees, his eyes trained on the men dying a few meters under us.

“Well, yes. You didn’t think you were a real knight, did you? You don’t have an ounce of honor. You failed to stop your master from behaving like a fool and even betrayed him in the end. How could you have the right to call yourself a knight? Or is this what you think chivalry is about?”

“N-No, you’re wron—”

“You know I’m right. You betrayed the prince, couldn’t protect your comrades, and have no honor. You’re no knight—just some piece of trash.”

“No! I’m not! I’m not!” He raised his hand toward the sky and screamed, “Divine Artifact, Knight’s Crest!”

Mana exploded from his body before gathering in his hand, becoming the shape of a sword.

“AAAAAAAH!!!” he roared, swinging his Divine Artifact at me with no semblance of technique.

I kicked his hand, and he immediately let go of his sword. It pierced the ground.

“How unsightly,” I said.

Robert stared at me in silence.

“How weak you are.”

He didn’t even try to pick up his sword and fell to his knees once more, defeated. I looked down on him and unsheathed Flügel, then swung it effortlessly and chopped his Divine Artifact into two.

“Knight’s Crest... What a grand name. One that is far too heavy for a sham of a knight like you to bear.”

Robert screamed as he watched his precious Divine Artifact be destroyed beyond repair. Tears started flowing down his cheeks.

“Well, I suppose it’s almost time for the grand finale,” I said. “Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Asmodeus.”

◇

When I got to the imperial capital, Mireille and the rest of the volunteer army had already arrived.

“Welcome home, Miss Ellie,” Misha greeted me.

“It’s good to see you, Misha. Where is Mireille?” I said.

“Miss Mireille is at her desk, looking through the reports that came in while the two of you were away.”

“I see. Thank you.”

I waved Misha goodbye with my left hand and headed to the office.

“Mireille,” I called as I entered the room.

“Miss Ellie! You’re back!” exclaimed Mireille.

“Yes. Tell me, were there any issues on your side?”

“No, nothing in particula— Miss Ellie! What happened to your arm?!”

I thought I was doing well at hiding it, but nothing got past Mireille’s observant eyes. She softly took my right arm and rolled up my sleeve.

“H-How did that—”

“I’m fine, Mireille. This is neither an injury nor an illness.”

“Then what?”

“The price of using the Grimoire of Asmodeus.”

“The Grimoire of Asmodeus... That is one of the three grimoires you never told me about.”

“It is... Well, I suppose I could tell you about them, Mireille.”

There was no point in hiding this from Mireille anymore, so I told her about the powers of my last three grimoires.

“I see... So that’s why...” whispered Mireille after listening to my explanation.

“Yes. Using it on this sham of a knight might have been a bit of

a waste. Still, it shall serve as a nice omen."

"An omen?" repeated Mireille, perplexed.

"The kingdom will soon realize that I'm in the empire. When that happens, we're bound to clash. I plan to act in the shadows until I build up to a very public—and grand—confrontation. Unbeknownst to them, that pseudo-knight shall sound the death knell of the kingdom."

Mireille paused before saying. "Understood, miss. For the time being, I'll bring you some bandages at once to hide the state of your arm."

"Good idea. I must say I'm in quite a lot of pain and will need to take it easy for a while."

◆

In the wasteland that acted as a buffer zone between the Kingdom of Haldoria and the Yutear Empire was a peddler. He'd come to the wasteland to gather monster material to sell to the merchants he had ties with at the royal capital.

The peddler finally finished hunting for materials and drove his wagon back to the capital, traveling along the border of the kingdom until he gasped, flabbergasted. He abruptly pulled on the reins, stopping his horses in their tracks.

He'd just seen a person appear from a rocky area.

"Hey! Why are you stopping?!" asked another peddler who was sitting inside the wagon, peeking out from behind the curtain.

Both men were former adventurers and were quite confident in their fighting abilities. That was why they traveled with no escort. If they ran into brigands, they had no choice but to deal with them head-on.

"Some guy appeared out of nowhere," said the driver.

After a few more steps, the mysterious young man they'd run into collapsed without a word.

"Doesn't look like a brigand to me."

Blood and dirt covered the young man, but under the grime, his appearance was too neat to be that of a brigand. The same went for the quality of his battered armor.

"Did he collapse out of exhaustion?"

"Who knows? Hey, son! Are you okay?!"

The peddlers ran up to the young man. While he was

unconscious, they noticed he was still breathing.

"What d'ya wanna do?"

"I don't know. Nothing? Hang on... Isn't that the royal knights' crest?"

"You're right! So that guy's a knight from the capital, huh? Didn't the Sarjas and the empire go at it a few weeks ago?"

"Think he lost in battle and ended up here?"

"Probably. Oh well, let's bring him back to the capital."

"Yeah. If he's a knight at that age he's gotta be the little lord of some rich noble family, right? They'll give us a little something for our trouble for sure!"

The two peddlers carried the young man to their wagon and continued their journey.

◆

"Ugh... Wh-Where am I?" whimpered Robert as he woke up, pain shooting through his entire body.

Robert forced his heavy eyelids open and looked around. The first thing that caught his eye was a sword decorating the wall in front of him, then he noticed a woman. She was looking at him, a worried expression on her face.

"Lord Robert!" she exclaimed. "You've finally come to!"

"You... You're..."

He knew this woman very well as she was one of the maids of House Arty. The woman had watched over him as a child, and he considered her almost like an older sister.

Robert groaned in pain.

"I will get the doctor at once, so please stay put!" exclaimed the maid before running out of the room.

"You'll be fine," concluded the old doctor who sat at his bedside after examining him. "Your wounds have healed up nicely thanks to the magic and potion. Rest for a few more days to regain your strength too."

"Got it..." answered Robert, putting his shirt back on.

Two people came rushing in as soon as the doctor exited the room. The first, a young girl, jumped into Robert's arms immediately.

"Brother!"

“Rowa,” Robert greeted his younger sister, Rowalize.

She had just turned nine and was overjoyed to finally see her beloved brother again after several months of separation.

“Don’t jump on him, Rowa. Robert is tired,” a voice called out.

“Mother,” said Robert as he watched his second visitor enter the room.

“What in the world happened to you, Robert?” asked his mother. “You were found unconscious, alone in the wasteland.”

“In the wasteland?” echoed Robert, confused.

He tried to retrace his memories, but his mind felt foggy, and couldn’t make out anything clearly.

“Why was I—”

“I’m coming in,” a deep voice interrupted him. The man who walked in was imposing and muscular. It was his father, and he continued, “You’re finally awake, Robert.”

Ernest, knight commander of the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Haldoria, was a fearless fighter who’d wandered from one battlefield to the next for most of his life with King Bulat.

“Father.”

“You fool!” his father roared. He walked up to his son’s bedside, and before Robert could react, he clenched his battle-worn fist and struck his cheek.

Rowalize screamed as she saw the impact lift her brother from his bed and slam him into the wall.

“You moved an army without His Majesty the King’s permission and murdered innocent civilians! Worse, you dared come back alive after the annihilation of your men?! Do you not know shame?!”

“N-No... I... I—”

“Silence! You brought shame to our name! You’re not worthy of calling yourself a knight! In fact, I’m stripping you of your position as of today! You’ll start from the bottom as a low-class soldier! Being a foot soldier will teach you what honor means!”

At these words, Ernest turned back.

He grabbed the doorknob and, without looking at his son, added, “Robert, as a knight, I’m ashamed of you. But let me say one thing as your father... Thank you for coming back alive, son.”

Then, he left.

Robert spent the next few days in bed, resting. His doctor eventually told him it was all right to move. He stood up and lightly stretched as he paced around his room.

He had yet to remember what had happened to him. No matter how badly he tried, his foggy mind would not cooperate. He did not know how he'd ended up in the wasteland or what had become of his men.

Just then, he slowly walked to the wall and took the sword that decorated it in hand. It felt strangely heavy, but Robert assumed it was because he hadn't exercised or wielded a sword in a while.

"Brother!" a bubbly voice came from behind him.

"What is it, Rowa?" he asked, slowly turning around to face her.

Rowalize was running up to him, smiling.

Robert stepped forward to hug his cute little sister...but thrust his blade at her instead, stabbing her in the chest.

"Argh!"

"Huh?" Robert reacted, confused.

He didn't understand what was happening and stared at her blankly as her warm blood splattered, hitting his cheek.

"Huh?" he repeated.

"B-Bro...ther..."

"R-Rowa? What...?"

"Wh-Why...?"

Robert couldn't take his eyes off his sister. Blood was gushing out, pooling at her feet, and the blade sticking out of her small frame looked almost grotesque. When Robert looked down, he saw his hand firmly holding the grip.

He screamed in horror.

Little did Robert know that this was the beginning of a ruthless tragedy.

"Lord Robert? What's wron— AAAAAAAH!!!" screamed the maid who'd just come through the door to check on her master.

"No! I-I didn't! I..."

While Robert's voice was shaky and his expression unsure, his body moved without hesitation. He crossed the room and slashed at the maid. The head of the woman he'd always loved as though she were his older sister flew, splattering fresh blood everywhere.

Robert released a sharp cry and ran out. He couldn't control his body anymore, and he violently slew every single servant he came across.

As he thrust his blade into the bodies of these people he'd known from childhood, Robert whispered, "Why...?! Why am I...?

No! That's not me! It's not me!"

Another woman suddenly appeared in front of him.

"What in the world is going on?!" she exclaimed.

"MOTHER!!!"

"R-Robert?!"

Robert watched himself push his blade into his mother's right shoulder and slash hard, forcing it out on her left side as if it were in slow motion. The sight burned into his retinas.

As she screamed in pain, he let out a guttural roar.

"WHAT THE HELL?! WHAT AM I DOING?! WHY?!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

He couldn't stop and kept pushing forward, exiting the residence with his bloodied sword in hand.

House Arty was a prestigious noble family that often spawned members of the Royal Guard. For this reason, their residence was not in the noble district but on the fringes of the capital, next to the knight's training ground.

Close to the training ground was also one of the most popular markets in the capital, crawling with people at all hours of the day.

◆

"Ha ha ha! This county is mine now!"

"Nooo! Save me, my prince!"

"Elizabeth, you witch! I won't let you do as you please! I, Friede, will stop you with my blade!" exclaimed a little boy wearing a cape made of some old fabric and holding a stick, jumping in front of a little girl and glaring at his friend who was role-playing as Elizabeth.

"My, what are they doing?" a woman asked.

"Right. You were away at your parents' for a while, weren't you? The kids love this game these days. They pretend to be Prince Friede and Lady Sylvia and chase away the evil witch," responded another woman.

"Is that so? But isn't Elizabeth that young lady who often organized charity events for us commoners?"

"Yes, yes, her. She was doing horrible things in secret! Apparently, she used her position as the future queen to conceal her evil actions. But Lady Sylvia found out!"

"Oh dear!"

“So Elizabeth tried to kill her!”

“What a monster!”

“Thankfully, our prince protected Lady Sylvia, and both won over the witch.”

“That’s a relief!”

The children’s fight was nearing its climax, and the two housewives watched over them as they gossiped.

As always, once the children finished playing around, they’d bring them home and cook dinner before their husbands returned from work.

However, their uneventful routine was dyed crimson in an instant. The two mothers had taken their eyes off the children for less than a second when suddenly, their severed torsos hit the ground.

The women opened their eyes wide. In front of them was a man laughing like a madman, with tears streaked across his face as he held a sword in hand.

“Wh—”

Before they could so much as think of resisting, he brought his sword down on the first housewife and let her blood spatter everywhere.

The second woman screamed.

“N-No... D-Don’t...” she whispered as she fell on her backside, her legs refusing to hold her up anymore.

“You’re wrong... Ha ha ha... I didn’t! Ha ha! It’s not... It’s not me... Ha ha! I’d never... I wouldn’t... HA HA HA HA!!!”

Still laughing, the madman thrust his sword into the terrified woman’s belly.

“STOOOOP!!!”

“HA HA HA HA!!!”

Robert cried and laughed uncontrollably, wandering through the busy market where hundreds of citizens had gathered and put the sword through everyone he could reach. By the time the knights stopped him, the market had turned into an ocean of blood reminiscent of the worst battlefields in history.

◆

“How horrific.”

A meeting was taking place inside the castle of the royal capital

of Haldoria. Around the table, everyone sighed, exhausted.

"The criminal is Lord Arty's son, isn't it?"

"Yes. His wife and daughter were killed too, it would appear."

"I'd feel bad for him, but it's hard when his son committed such a massacre."

The man who'd just spoken had lowered his voice as much as possible, yet his words echoed in the quiet space of the meeting room.

Standing in a corner of the room, Ernest Arty clenched his fist until his nails dug into his palms, drawing blood. He had cast his eyes downward, and his face was as pale as sheets.

"Quiet!" shouted the prime minister, bringing back silence.

Bulat, who sat on an ornate chair, then used a heavy tone. "Sieg, how many victims?"

"Besides Lord Arty's family members and servants, he killed eighty-five citizens, twenty-one soldiers, and two knights. There are far more wounded with various degrees of injuries."

"His thorough training and talent backfired in the end..."

"Yes. Lord Arty's son is an outstanding swordsman. Without Elizabeth, he would have been recognized far and wide as the genius of his generation."

"Right... Do we know why he did that?"

"No. He insists that it wasn't him and keeps repeating that he'd 'never do something like that.' I'm afraid he's too incoherent for proper questioning. The doctor who tended to him before the incident informed us that he couldn't recall what happened to him before he returned to the capital. We're assuming he developed a mental disorder after a traumatic experience on the battlefield."

"I see. War must have been too much for a young man like him," said Bulat, closing his eyes and sighing deeply. He then opened them again and directed his knight commander. "Ernest. You've been by my side since we were young. You've served me valiantly in battle, and I consider you a dear friend. I wish I could be merciful, but..."

"That's out of the question, Your Majesty," Sieg immediately said. "There have been too many casualties among the citizens. If you do not make him answer for his sins, the people will lose their faith in the royal family."

"You heard him," declared Bulat after a brief reprieve. "I'm sorry, Ernest."

“I’m not worthy of your compassion and consideration, Your Majesty,” said Ernest. “My foolish son is responsible for what happened, and so am I. And so, I ask that you punish us impartially.”

Bulat paused before saying, “Very well. I shall pass down my judgment. Robert Arty is sentenced to death for Class-A murder. As you know, the families of Class-A murderers are considered guilty through association. Considering your long-standing loyalty, Ernest, I shall be lenient. You’re hereby stripped of your position of knight commander and demoted from count to baron. You will also be assigned to defend a fortress at our border.”

“Your Majesty!” cried Ernest.

Bulat shook his head and replied, “I know you feel responsible for what your son did, but our kingdom is in turmoil. I cannot afford to lose any more loyal subjects.”

“But—” exclaimed Ernest, trying to step forward but staggering and falling to his knees.

“You’ve slept little, isn’t that right, Ernest?” said Bulat gently. “You’re excused. Go rest.”

“Your Majesty…”

“Take Ernest to a doctor. Now.”

Several waiting maids rushed to the former knight commander at the king’s command, dragging him away.

“Sieg, find someone to stick by Ernest’s side for the time being,” instructed Bulat once he was far enough away not to hear him anymore. “I’m worried he’ll harm himself if we leave him be.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

◆

Robert had met Sylvia during his second year at the academy. On that day, he’d sparred with Elizabeth during a swordsmanship class and lost. Despite his being the son of the knight commander, a mere girl had defeated him.

As the prime candidate to become Friede’s closest aide and knight, Robert had met Elizabeth several times prior to that day. He knew she could fight to some extent but had always believed he’d come out on top.

Nonetheless, he hadn’t been able to beat her.

After school, he’d retreated to the garden behind the academy,

utterly shocked. He'd swung his blade repeatedly until exhaustion caught up to him before lying on the grass.

"Hi. What are you doing alone in such a place?" a voice had come from behind—Sylvia.

They conversed, and she praised his swordsmanship. From that day onward, Robert became drawn to her and her pure gaze. He thought she always looked at him as if she truly admired him.

Before he could profess his love to her, Sylvia and Friede had fallen for each other. Unable to speak of his feelings, Robert had made a vow. Even if he couldn't be with Sylvia, he'd devote his sword to her and Friede, his friend and liege.

In his youth, Robert had always felt like one of those knights from the stories, forced to bear the weight of an impossible love.

"Get up! Move!" screamed someone, waking Robert from his sleep and pulling him away from his bittersweet memories.

After being caught, he'd been thrown into a room in the barracks next to the castle with handcuffs and an antimagic collar. Guards in full armor fetched him and pulled on the chain that was connected to his restraints, dragging him out.

Robert had to walk through the corridors that led to the outside for a while before he exited the building to encounter Friede and his fiancée, Sylvia. The guards stopped promptly, bowing to their prince.

"Your Highness..." whispered Robert, staring at his liege.

His eyes were vacant, and the dark circles under them were deep and marked.

"You've outdone yourself, Robert," mocked Friede. "Thanks to the stunt you pulled, I'm being criticized too for being stupid enough to trust you."

"No... I..."

"Shut up, you trash! I can't believe I made a monster like you my knight!"

"That's not... As a knight, I... M-My pride...as a knight..."

"So you *have* lost your mind. Guards! Take him away!"

"At once!"

They pulled on the chain once more, forcing Robert to follow them. As he passed in front of Friede, he came face-to-face with Sylvia, hiding behind the prince.

"Sylvia... Sylvia!" exclaimed Robert. "It was all for you! I

became a knight to make you happy!”

“Stop struggling!” yelled the guards, holding the leash tight as Robert tried to get closer to the prince’s fiancée.

“Sylvia!” Robert called once more.

“Watch yourself…” she whispered, almost inaudibly.

“Sylvia?”

She glared at him. “Stop being so familiar with me, you murderer!”

Robert gasped, stunned. He stammered, “B-But… Sylvia… It’s not what you—”

“Enough!” shouted Friede, using his sheathed sword to hit Robert and shut him up. “We’ve heard more than enough! Let’s go, Sylvie.” Friede looked at the guard. “What are you waiting for? Take him away!” He turned to Robert again. “I thought you’d at least apologize for your crime, but here you are… I’m sorely disappointed, Robert. Farewell.”

Friede turned on his heels and walked away with Sylvia in tow. As for Robert, the guards brought him outside.

Insults and stones rained as he paraded through the streets of the capital.

“Murderer!”

“Die!”

“Give me back my son!”

“I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!”

The crowd was the very reason the guards had worn a full set of armor. While stanchions stood along the path to prevent the crowd from approaching, distributed stone baskets were meant to quell the citizens’ anger.

The guards never stopped in their tracks. Even when a stone hit Robert in the face and caused him to collapse, they forcefully pulled him to his feet and dragged him forward.

Eventually, they reached their destination—the execution platform installed at the center of the city square, in the heart of the capital.

Robert arrived at the elevated platform as the crowd that filled the city square booed and shouted. A gong echoed, the sound as violent as the roar of thunder, and the crowd quieted down instantly.

The executioner, who wore a heavy helmet that entirely concealed his face, raised his voice, “It is time for the sinner, Robert

Arty, to receive his punishment!"

At his signal, the guards held Robert down, forcing him on his knees. The executioner raised his spear, paused for a second in the air, then thrust it into Robert's back.

"ARGH!!!"

Beyond the bloodied tip of the spear poking out of his chest, all Robert could see was an ocean of faces filled with resentment.

This suffering would end at last.

Robert had slain his adorable sister, his beloved mother, his dear family and servants, and the people he'd sworn to protect with his own two hands. Ever since that moment, he hadn't been able to rid himself of the horrible sensation of his sword cutting through their flesh.

He'd always dreamed of becoming an exemplary, honorable knight, and yet...

Just as he'd given up and readied himself to welcome the end, the fog lifted, and he remembered *everything*. He saw his comrades melt, dissolved by that hateful creature as they screamed in pain and terror. He saw the symbol of his pride, his Divine Artifact, sliced in half as poisonous words convinced him he wasn't worthy of being a knight.

And he saw the satisfied look on that beautiful face as he broke down, crying.

"Ah..." he let out.

He had to speak up and let them know. Although he was no longer a knight, he had to warn his homeland about the danger that loomed over it.

Robert's body grew colder and colder, but he willed himself to move, to call out to the executioner.

Elizabeth was out to get revenge!

However, the abuse of the crowd swallowed the words he managed to utter with every last bit of strength he had left, never to reach anyone.

As his consciousness started slipping away from him, he felt as though he could hear a woman's voice amid the pain.

"A fake knight like you can't do anything right. You have no honor. Your death shall be as meaningless as your life was."

◇

I was in my residence in the imperial capital, looking through some documents, when I suddenly felt the pain in my right arm disappear.

"Oh?" I noted.

"Miss Ellie?"

I removed my bandage and examined my skin—it was unmarred.

"Your arm!" exclaimed Mireille.

"The pseudo-knight is dead," I said.

It had taken longer than expected, but I enjoyed imagining the kingdom in disarray.

The Grimoire of Asmodeus allowed me to alter my target's memories and cast a powerful hypnosis on them under certain conditions. While it was impressive, it had a limited range of applications.

First, I could only use it on one target at a time and couldn't lift the effect until the target died, unless I touched them directly. I also had to bear a curse proportional to the effect's power.

All in all, the grimoire was complicated to use.

"I'm so relieved to see your arm is fine," said Mireille.

"Forgive me for worrying you," I answered. "I'm looking forward to the reports. I can't wait to hear how he fared."

Now that my right hand had recovered, I reached out for my cup with it. I took in the pleasant fragrance of the coffee, then sipped it down to the last drop.

◇◆☆◆◇

"And so, we could say this event marked the start of the Kingdom of Haldoria's downfall. Mere hours after Robert Arty's execution, his father, former Knight Commander Ernest Arty, knocked his guards unconscious and took his own life. In other words, Robert's foolish actions led to the ruin of House Arty. Historians have outlined three potential causes that may have prompted Robert to act. Do any of you know what they are?" asked the elderly teacher.

One of the students raised their hands and shouted, "Me!"

"Go ahead, Liam."

"That he suffered from a mental disorder due to the war, that he fell in love with Lady Sylvia, or that he resented the crown prince, Friede."

"That is correct. Thank you, Liam. This assumption is only my personal view, but I believe the mental disorder theory holds the most weight. His doctor's notes remain and certainly point in that direction. Though you may not have heard of it, there is a fourth, rather far-fetched, theory. Some say that the now known Foolish Prince Friede's former fiancée, Elizabeth Leiston, cursed him. Ridiculous, right?" joked the elderly teacher.

The students giggled.

The school bell chimed, bringing the class to an end.

"Oh my, this is all for today," said the teacher. "Next time, we'll focus on Ellie Leis, also known as the Silver Witch, who rose to prominence in the empire after the conflict we just covered. Don't forget to do the reading before coming to class."

Second period for the third-year students at the National Adel Institute.

Continental History taught by Frayd Lotte.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, I'm Hagure Metabo.

Thank you very much for picking up this first volume of *A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires*.

Even though I started writing to satisfy my craving for this specific type of story, I ended up receiving the first prize at the HJ Novel Award in the first half of 2021 and even had my work published. It's truly a dream come true for me!

When I submitted my work for the award, I only hoped to see how far my skills could take me. I cheered when I passed the first round of judgment and congratulated myself when I passed the second. The final result, however, surprised me so much that I didn't know what to do! I never expected things to turn out this way, and my heart wasn't ready.

Still, whenever I read the works of my seniors, I always hoped to one day also turn my stories into proper books. I did everything to get closer to this goal, and I finally get to present my work to my dear readers in this way!

To be perfectly honest, I just turned my bookshelves upside down when I went through every book I could to check the afterword so I could find the inspiration to write my own. I'm finally realizing how difficult it actually is to transition from the anecdote part to the acknowledgments seamlessly.

Writers are amazing, aren't they?

Anyway, let me move on to the acknowledgments.

First of all, I'm beyond grateful to my illustrator, masami, for portraying my characters so beautifully and coming up with such cool designs. Each new illustration I received made me feel like this story was getting closer to turning into a finished book!

I'd also like to thank S, my editor, who helped me pull through, even though I had absolutely no idea what I was doing initially. Thank you so much!

Oonoimo is also in the process of adapting this story into a

manga. The manga should start publishing the same day this first volume comes out. I've seen the storyboards and am beyond excited to see the finished product!

I'm very thankful to everyone who worked hard to bring this manuscript to you. Everyone bent over backward to make this happen, to the point that I'm convinced they'd emerge victorious from a limbo competition.

Last but not least, I'd like to extend my thanks to you, my dear readers. I couldn't have done any of this without your support.

Thank you very much!

Hagure Metabo

Bonus Short Story

Lunoa's Choice

I pushed through my throbbing headache and got up.

A few months ago, I was involved in a carriage accident and almost died. My father did everything in his power to acquire potions for me, and I barely escaped death.

However, my injuries were so severe that the potions did not heal me. All they could do was push back my inevitable demise, and I should have died when my parents ran out of money.

And yet, I was alive and kicking. The healing magic cast on me had been getting rid of every last scar.

Under normal circumstances, hiring a healer was incredibly costly. Even though my father worked for one of the biggest companies in the viscounty, he could not borrow enough money to pay for someone proficient enough to heal such serious injuries. The best he could afford at the price of countless sacrifices was potions.

At the time, I didn't want to keep burdening my parents, asking them over and over again to stop buying potions. They wept every time I brought it up. In the end, only time went by with none of us able to do anything to break out of the status quo.

Eventually, my father ran into trouble at work. He did not come home for a while until one day, he returned with a beautiful woman in tow. This woman was the new head of his firm and could use healing magic. My father had helped her with some work, and she'd agreed to cure me as payment.

Ellie Leis, as she was called, cast a powerful spell on me, healing me in the blink of an eye.

Quite some time had gone by ever since her intervention, but I still could not get out of bed. While I had my injuries perfectly cured, I'd started suffering from peculiar aftereffects in the last twenty-four hours.

"How are you feeling, Lunoa?" asked my father, dropping into my room before heading to work.

“Do you think you can stomach some food?” inquired my mother with a plate in hand.

“Yeah...” I faltered.

I sat in bed while my mother pushed a desk to my bedside and set my plate down. At that moment...

Cabbage, a leafy vegetable, cheap and tasty. *Scallion balls*, round vegetables, reasonably cheap, reasonably good. *Mimi peas*, green beans, cheap, disgusting. *Wooden plate*, a plate made of wood, price unclear, well used. *Wooden spoon*, a spoon made of wood, fairly cheap, cracked. *Water*, taken from the backyard well, scooped this morning, lukewarm. *Wooden cup*, a cup made of wood, light. *Wooden desk*, a desk made of wood, large.

“Urgh...”

Countless words started flowing through my brain. I closed my eyes and held my head firmly with my hands.

“Lunoa!”

“I-I’m fine...” I struggled to say.

“Miss Ellie’s magic must be affecting her,” said my mother, worried.

“It’s possible. I’ll ask her about it,” declared my father, taking his leave.

I couldn’t see him off properly as I kept my eyes shut, pulling the bed sheets over my head. As long as I stayed like that, nothing would happen.

What in the world is wrong with me?

A few hours later, right after lunchtime, my father came home early, accompanied by Miss Ellie.

“How are you, Lunoa?” she asked me. “I heard you were suffering from some odd aftereffect. Could you tell me about it?”

“So...whenever I see something, information about it starts flowing through my mind.”

“I see...”

“Could you hold this in your mouth?” said her friend wearing a maid uniform, Miss Mireille, as she handed me a Mana Meter.

It wasn’t my first time seeing one of these. I already had my mana measured at the church when I was six. As such, I closed my lips around the Mana Meter, and Miss Mireille took it back after a while.

“Miss Ellie,” she said politely, giving it to her.

“Thank you,” replied Miss Ellie, reading the value and nodding.

“It would appear the bountiful mana that slumbered deep within Lunoa woke up when it came in contact with my magic.”

“She has that much mana?!” exclaimed my father.

My mother and I were just as surprised to hear this. According to the church, I had no more mana than your average person.

“Sometimes, an individual’s mana only awakens after coming in contact with another source of mana or experiencing a traumatic event,” explained Miss Ellie. “Based on what Lunoa described earlier, I would say she mastered the unique spell Item Analysis at the same time.”

“A-A unique spell?!”

I didn’t know the details but I knew unique spells were special because they had no link to any specific attribute.

“This is a rare talent, Lunoa. Item Analysis can become a merchant’s most powerful asset. If you’d like, I can teach you magic,” said Miss Ellie.

“Teach me…magic?” I repeated.

“Yes, and that’s not all. I’m happy to teach you what it takes to become a merchant as well. What do you say, Lunoa? Would you like to become my apprentice?”

“I…”

I’d do it. By making it as a merchant, I might be able to repay my parents for everything they’d done for me.

As Miss Ellie said, my unique spell could become helpful to merchants. In that case, there was no need to hesitate.

“I-I do! Please teach me magic, Miss Ellie!”

Two weeks later, I was sitting in the break room of Miss Ellie’s firm.

Thanks to her teachings, Item Analysis did not run wild anymore. I would officially become an apprentice at Traitre to learn business and magic from Miss Ellie.

I had been waiting alone, trying my best to manage my stress as I checked over and over again that there were no creases on the new outfit she’d gifted me. Eventually, I heard the door open, noticing Miss Ellie and Miss Mireille walk in.

“I’m sorry for the wait,” said Miss Ellie.

“I-It’s nothing,” I exclaimed, jumping to my feet and straightening my back.

Miss Ellie looked at me from head to toe before saying,

“Perfect. You look great. Well then, I look forward to working with you, Lunoa.”

From that day onward, she would become my boss and my teacher. I’d made up my mind to respect and follow her as she truly deserved.

“Likewise, Miss Ellie!”

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A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires Volume 1
by Hagure Metabo

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